

JASON HAMILTON



# TO WORLD'S ABOVE

ROOTS OF CREATION BOOK 5

AN EPIC YA FANTASY ADVENTURE

# **To World's Above**

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Roots of Creation Book 5

# Jason Hamilton

Story Hobby Media

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About the Author

Also by Jason Hamilton

“H ow are you still alive?” Skellig sat across from Marek, on

two makeshift stone stools, while Jak watched from ten paces away, with Seph standing right beside her. Others of the council were there as well: Yewin and Jak’s mother, Karlona. But Jak kept her arms folded, carefully observing Marek as Skellig interrogated him, not bothering to look at anyone else. It did not help that the man kept glancing in her direction.

Marek. Her best friend in the whole world before leaving Riverbrook. The best comfort she had had after the death of her father. The man who had wanted to be more than a friend, even though she hadn’t known it at the time.

And also, the man who died.

Jak had seen it happen. Demons had bit into him, dragging him over the wall at Foothold. Even if he could have survived the fall, there was no way anyone could have escaped the horde of demons that would have awaited him at the base. So who was this man that sat in front of Jak without a scratch on him?

“I knew none of you would believe it,” said Marek. His tone was completely calm, and it unsettled Jak. Though just hearing that voice was enough to do that. She had grown up hearing that voice, even before it had dropped, before he had grown up. She tightened her grip on the polished staff in her hands. It was a Pillar of Eternity, one of the fabled Relics that would help bring a peaceful coexistence between the Fae and humanity. One of three.

“You can bet on the ancestors that we don’t believe you,” Skellig continued in an incredulous tone. “We have witnesses that saw you dragged off the Foothold wall, and into a pack of hungry demons. Care to explain how you got out of that mess?”

Marek hesitated, staring off into the distance as if he was mildly confused. It was the first time Jak had seen such an expression that night. “I’m...not entirely sure myself,” he said.

“Well, we don’t have all night.” Skellig folded her arms. “So you better get to talking, or we’re just going to assume you’re a

shapeshifter and let the trolls have their way with you.”

A low growl echoed from the throat of Rael, the lead troll. Nearly ten feet high and made of what looked like stone, they had been instrumental in saving them all from an army of demons. Jak had named him Rael after her father. Despite his odd, stony appearance, or perhaps because of it, the troll reminded her of him.

Marek cocked his head at Skellig. “A shapeshifter? I don’t understand.”

“We’ve had at least two encounters with a form of advance demon that could change shape at will. One was Captain Kuldain, though you were...dead when he revealed himself.”

“Hm, I’m sorry, I don’t know anything about that. But I can assure you that’s not what I am.” He put his hands out, palms upward in an expression of innocence. “I’m really Marek.”

“So you keep saying,” Jak cut in. “And yet you still haven’t told us how you managed to escape unharmed.”

Both Skellig and Marek turned to look at her. Skellig’s lips were pressed together in a line. Yes, Jak could tell Skellig had an idea of what seeing Marek was doing to her. What it would do if Jak let it. But she couldn’t let it. This was not a time to let bias sway her judgement. She had to be logical in dealing with the man, and logic screamed that he should not be there.

And yet, if he really was Marek, could they really drive him away, or...what exactly would they do to him?

“I haven’t answered because I’m not sure myself.” Marek said, his voice still calm, not in any way frustrated. “Like you, the last thing I remember is falling over the wall. When I woke, I was some distance away, and there wasn’t a scratch on me.”

“Amnesia is a convenient excuse. You’ll understand if we don’t take it seriously.” Skellig put her hands together and leaned in.

“And of course, you shouldn’t. I wouldn’t believe me if I were in your position.”

He was altogether too calm for the situation, and it didn’t seem like the Marek Jak knew. The real Marek would be doing everything he could to convince them, or excitedly tell them the story of how he survived certain death. But this Marek wasn’t doing that. His face remained impassive, pleasant, like they were talking about how nice the weather was that day. Of everything, it was this behavior that unsettled her the most.

“When I awoke, I was...different,” he said. “I could remember who I was, but I felt reborn. And then a voice spoke to me.”

Jak narrowed her eyes, and Skellig’s lips twitched as if she was holding back a smirk. “You...heard a voice.”

Marek nodded, as though it was a perfectly ordinary thing to say.

Jak was barely aware of Seph shuffling his feet behind her. He had said nothing for this entire conversation, but she could tell he was listening closely.

"It told me that my work was not over, that I was destined to help in some grand cause. It revealed things to me. Visions of the future, of the present. And I knew that whatever I was destined for—" he met Jak's eyes. "—it had to do with you."

Jak remained rooted to the spot, keeping her expression blank. "Why did you not come to us sooner? Or return to Foothold? Skellig was in charge there for a time. You could have met her there."

"Well, when I say I woke up some distance away, I am not exaggerating. I woke up on the top of a mountain, not far from here, actually. I've been traveling for two weeks now."

"Two weeks?" Jak cut in. "It's been almost two years since Foothold. Are you saying you only just regained consciousness?"

"I'm afraid so," he said. "But that would explain why you managed to get all the way here from Foothold. We're close to Riverbrook, right? I thought I recognized some of the mountain peaks, though I wasn't sure, seeing as I was coming from the other side."

At hearing him talk about their old home, the beginnings of a headache began to pulse at Jak's temples. If this Marek wasn't genuine, and there was no way he could be, then the last thing she wanted to think of was her old home. All the times she had played Watchers and Demons with Marek, all the times they had explored the foothills together, those were memories she had thought were buried. Now they all came crowding to the surface.

"It seems you've been busy while I was gone." Marek continued. He waved a finger at Jak's forehead, where a Telekinetic brand lay. "You've found a way to give yourself more brands. I always thought someone would figure it out eventually."

"That doesn't surprise you?" Skellig said through laced fingers.

"Not really. All of that knowledge was given to me when I awoke. I saw you, Jak, I saw what you would become. And I wasn't sure what was reality, or what would happen in the future."

"If you saw what we've been through, then perhaps you'll understand why we cannot trust you," Jak began.

"I told you I do," Marek interrupted.

"And therefore, you'll also understand why we can't exactly let you go, or roam freely among us. We need some kind of assurance that you're..."

Suddenly, the ache in Jak's head intensified to something far more sharp. Her vision blurred and she put one hand to her head. Something flashed before her eyes, an image, or more of an impression. It showed her a large man, covered in scars and melted



skin, but with a body glowing with the light of countless brands. Then just as suddenly as she saw the image, it vanished, and the headache lessened. She focused on the space around her.

Karlona had taken a few steps toward her, out of concern. Others were watching her, including Marek.

“Are you alright?” asked Skellig through furrowed eyebrows.

“I...I’m fine. Just a headache.”

“You just saw him, didn’t you?” Marek said coolly.

Jak fixed her eyes on her old friend. “Saw who?”

“Cain,” he said. He said it so simply, but the effect it had was disproportionate to his tone. Karlona reached for a dagger, Skellig was on her feet in an instant, and Jak tightened her grip on the Pillar of Eternity in her hand. Everyone around them tensed.

“How do you know about him?” Jak said. She kept her voice calm, but she could not stop the ice from entering in.

“It’s okay, I understand your concern. Again, it’s not necessarily something I can explain. Two weeks ago I awoke, and I knew that he was a threat to you, and that I had to reach you if we were to stop him.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” said Skellig. She still hadn’t sat back down.

“With the other piece of knowledge I was given,” he said. “I know where you can find another Pillar of Eternity.”

If he had been expecting a reaction similar to the previous one, he was disappointed. But that did not mean that Jak couldn’t feel what other people were thinking. Every one of them stood stock still.

Jak felt like every part of her body was waiting to see what would happen next. Surprising herself, she spoke first, “Just one, or do you know where the other is too?” There were supposed to be three Pillars of Eternity, though they had only recovered the one under Mt. Harafast.

Marek smiled, “You have one already,” he waved a hand at the staff that Jak held in her hand. “Rael would have been proud.”

Jak pressed her lips together. So he did recognize the staff. “And the third?”

Marek’s smile faltered. “No, I’m afraid I don’t know where it is. When I awoke I only knew that I needed to find you, and to find the second Pillar.”

Jak took a deep breath. She needed to talk to the others, away from Marek. But before that happened, she needed to know one thing.

“When we were little, we were playing by the river, and you fell in. What happened then?”

Marek blinked at her, pausing to think. “I was swept along the current for a while, until I managed to catch hold of a log that hung

over the river. I couldn't pull myself out though."

"And what did I do?" Jak asked.

Marek glanced at the others before bringing his eyes back to her again. "You ran away. I had to hold onto the log for twenty minutes before your father came to pull me out. I was almost out of strength. When he came, you weren't with him. And I didn't see you for days after that."

Jak closed her eyes. It was him, or at least something that had his memories. Had he been guessing, he would have said that she saved him, or something more heroic. That's what people expected from her now: heroism. They didn't expect that she would panic and run, that she was afraid to try and save her friend. She'd run to the farmhouse to tell her father. It had taken a full minute for him to even make sense of what she was saying, that's how hysterical she had been. It seemed almost silly now, but somehow, irrationally, the experience still haunted her.

She gave a little nod at Skellig, whose eyes darkened. Then with a jab of her head, Jak signaled to everyone that she needed to talk to them, away from Marek.

Skellig signalled to the other nearby Watchers to keep their guard

on Marek, while every member of the council who was there retreated with Jak to a space several yards away.

"It's him," she said when they were out of earshot. "Only he or my father could have known that story."

"You're sure neither of them would have told anyone?" said Skellig.

"No, at least not the part of me running away, both Marek and my father knew it was a point of shame for me."

Karlona nodded, seeming satisfied. If anyone in the group understood how Rael would react to a situation like that, it was her.

"Well, all that clarifies is that the boy has your friend's memories at least. I think we should be careful not to make assumptions." Skellig folded her arms.

"I agree," said Jak. "We can't trust him completely, not with that story."

"Actually, it's his story that makes me wonder," said Yewin. "Wouldn't a clever person come up with something a little more convincing?"

"What could be more convincing?" Karlona turned to her companion. "He literally died."

"And yet, no one found the body, correct? We just assumed that he had been consumed by the demons. A horrible demise, but one that tends not to leave evidence."

"I find it convenient," said Skellig.

"Perhaps, but there is some truth in his words." Yewin stroked at his golden hair. "Though I do get the sense that there's more there, perhaps more that he is not telling us, or that he does not know."

"But do you sense anything malicious about him?"

Yewin frowned, "No, I don't think so. Unusual, yes, but not malicious. I think he genuinely wants to help."

Seph shifted his weight next to Jak. He still hadn't said a word, and right now his hand was raised to his chin, and his eyes scanned

the ground. Probably deep in thought.

“Well,” Jak surveyed the rest of them. “That brings up the next important point. He claims to know where to find another Pillar of Eternity.”

They all went quiet for a few seconds, thinking that one through. When no one said anything, Jak continued, “We need those other Pillars.”

“We don’t even know what this new Pillar could do,” said Skellig.

“We know this one is powerful,” Jak held out the Pillar for them to inspect. “If the others are anywhere near as powerful, then they’re worth investigating.”

“And they’re essential if we want to create Illadar,” said Seph, breaking his silence. Jak tried to look at him, but he didn’t meet her eyes. He was still lost in thought.

“Yet the one thing we need right now is unity,” Skellig protested. “We’ve already spared Naem and several of the others, and only so they can recruit more allies. We can’t afford to let more people go off on a heroic quest.”

Jak frowned, but found herself nodding. Skellig was remembering everything that happened in Mt. Harafast, everything that led up to the discovery of the first Pillar of Eternity. That had not been a pleasant experience for anyone, and had almost led to the death of all who were present. And if there was one thing Jak had learned from that experience, it was exactly what Skellig was saying. They needed to stick together.

“And yet, I don’t know if we’ll have a chance against Cain without it,” she said. “And if Seph is correct, we’ll need to find them eventually to create a lasting peace.”

Skellig’s frown still showed, and she opened her mouth to say something when Karlona jumped in. “Perhaps we should compromise. Keep the boy with us, to make sure we can trust him. We don’t even know where he wants us to go yet. Depending on the place, perhaps all of us could travel there, at least part-way.”

“I like that idea,” Jak said. She didn’t want to make a decision like that right now anyway. She needed more time to think. “I say we keep him with us until we know more. We need to stay for a few more days anyway, just in case stragglers from Queen Telma’s army decide to join us.”

Skellig blew out a breath through closed lips. “I don’t like it.”

“I don’t think any of us do,” said Karlona, with a glance at Jak. “But it’s something that we have to deal with nonetheless.”

Well, that was true enough. That was true of almost everything Jak had gone through since leaving Riverbrook nearly two years prior.

“Very well,” said Skellig. “I’ll make sure he’s under armed guard at

all times. Can I assume the Shadow Fae will be willing to help with that?"

"We can," Karlona acknowledged. "And don't forget, we're trying to go by Elves now, or Shadow Elves, so no one confuses us with the Bright Elves."

Elves. It was a name to get used to, but one Jak kind of liked. It was an ancient word for 'enhanced beings' but also served as a tribute to Elva, one of the many humans who had given her life to save that of the Fae. Both the Bright and Shadow Fae had taken up the name for themselves.

"Of course, my apologies," said Skellig. "Well then, I suggest we stay here for the time being. The Water Fae are comfortable, if perhaps confined, in the small inlet here. And we can easily defend the northern end if need be, since the pass is narrower."

Jak nodded at the former Watcher. "Thanks Skellig, go ahead and do what you need to."

Skellig gave a curt nod and began walking back to where they held Marek. Yewin and Karlona followed. Jak was about to do the same, before she thought better of it. She needed to think the situation through a bit before talking to Marek again.

She turned to Seph. "You haven't said much."

Seph ran a hand through his dark hair. "It's a lot to process."

"Do you believe him? I feel like you would."

He squinted his eyes at her. "How so?"

Jak shrugged. "Well, you know, all that talk about dying and coming back to life with a mission. It's not that much more far-fetched than your stories about finding a book of prophecy, or what you say about an all-knowing God."

"The man died, Jak. Even he admits that probably happened. Since when has anyone returned from the dead?"

Jak closed her mouth. She had to admit he had a point there.

"Still," he went on. "If there was a need for it, I could see God sending a messenger like him to guide us."

"So you think he's telling the truth."

"Not necessarily. I just think we shouldn't discount it. We live in a time of incredible change, a time where prophecy becomes history. We can't make assumptions just because it's an unusual situation."

Jak nodded, and wrapped her arms around him in a soft hug. He hugged her back. She closed her eyes, letting the moment wash over her. Just minutes before Marek returned, they had shared a kiss. And it had been a good kiss too. Not hot and passionate, but sweet and innocent. And she had kissed him first, which had been exhilarating in its own right. But what really thrilled her was that he had kissed her back.

“So I take it this means we can...I dunno,” he trailed off.

She looked up at him, while still keeping her arms wrapped around his waist. “What?”

“I mean, you and Marek were close, right?” he said, rather sheepishly. “That isn’t going to...uh...complicate anything?”

Jak let out a soft laugh and leaned into him again. “Any relationship with me is complicated. But no, Marek and I never had that. He wanted it, I think. And perhaps in another life I might have loved him. But in that life we’d still be living in Riverbrook. He and I would have a farm somewhere, and it would be an unassuming, simple life.”

“And do you want that?”

She paused. It was a legitimate question. She took her time in answering. “There have been times when I thought I did. A simple life is also a good life, sometimes. And I would have had my father around. But I would never have met my mother, or any of you. Perhaps the Fae would have all died out or never formed in the first place. So no, I don’t think I would choose that life.”

“Even if it means your father would be alive?”

She broke the embrace, “Just how eager are you to get rid of me?” she said with one eyebrow raised.

He grinned, “I’m just more surprised that you’ve...that we...” He seemed unable to finish the sentence.

“That we kissed?” she said, with emphasis.

“Well...yeah,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck and still smiling.

Jak smiled back, but that smile quickly faded as her headache began acting up again. She put one hand to her temple and rubbed slowly, breathing out as she did so. Was it just her, or did she see the faint outline of a man again? Was Marek correct that she was seeing Cain? She had seen him once before from a distance. That time she had nearly died, bleeding out from a dagger wound to the gut. He had somehow spoken to her, though he had been a great distance away, probably in Mt. Harafast. Was that what was happening now?

“I’m sorry,” said Seph, his smile gone too as he observed her massage her forehead. “You’ve got a lot going on. We can talk about this later.”

Jak nodded. She wanted to talk about it with Seph, but now didn’t seem like the best time. Right now, they had some business to take care of.

Just then, a scout came running towards her. She recognized him as one of the Sightseers Skellig had ordered to watch the mountain pass. Upon seeing her, the scout ran in her direction.

“What is it?” she asked, her stomach fluttering. Was the queen

coming for them after all?

“We have deserters from the queen’s army, Lady Oren,” said the young man. Jak winced at the name they had chosen for her, but she let the man continue. “A small handful left the queen and followed us into the pass.”

“That’s wonderful news!” Jak said, pushing past the young man. And it was. Just before entering the mountain pass, she had presented the army with a choice of staying with the queen, or coming to her and joining them, in exchange for multiple brands. It was a strong incentive, but one she wasn’t sure would actually work. Apparently it had.

“There’s only two dozen of them,” the scout said. “We confronted them about a mile back. But they’re cooperating.”

“Excellent, I’m going to meet them.” said Jak. At last, something she could be happy about. Something she could do. “Go tell Skellig and have her meet me there. She can bring anyone she likes.”

“Yes, Lady Oren.” The scout saluted and turned to run further into their camp.

Jak gave one final look at Seph. The young preacher was smiling at her. “Sounds like you’re needed, Lady Oren.” He spoke the title with a glint in his eye.

Jak scowled but smiled once she had turned away from him, and began jogging in the direction the scout had indicated. Time to see what these new recruits had to offer.

**J**ust as the scout said, there were exactly two dozen soldiers from the enemy army. All of them had surrendered their weapons and waited patiently for Jak's arrival.

"I'm glad to meet you, Jak. My name is Tennet," said the leader once Jak arrived and they introduced themselves. "We had to wait until night time before we could safely leave. The queen gave orders that anyone who attempted to desert would be shot on sight."

"And yet you still decided to come."

"We're not alone either," said another of the soldiers, this one a woman. "But we knew we couldn't all leave at once, not the way things are. So we chose to come first, to see if you...if you would make good on your offer."

Jak nodded. "If you're truly willing to join us, I will. Did you encounter any resistance in getting here?"

"Very little," said the first man. "We snuck out, and they either didn't realize we were gone until it was too late, or the queen simply didn't bother. She spent most of the time before we left shut up in her tent anyway. We don't know what she was doing there."

"Well, in any case, we're glad you decided to come. I know it can't have been easy to leave your companions like that."

"There are many of us who have long felt dissatisfied with the way the queen handles such affairs," said the woman. "We only came because we were the only ones with no families that could be put in danger. We promised the others we would talk to you, see if your promise was genuine, then find them again."

"And we will do what we can to help with that. We already have several men and a few Shadow Elves that we sent to Skyecliff and Tradehall to recruit everyone who wants to come."

The clink of armor behind Jak signaled Skellig's arrival. Jak glanced at the major, then back at the deserters. "I'll let Skellig decide what we do with you in the immediate future. You'll understand if we don't fully assume you're all here for honorable purposes."

The others nodded. "We're ready to answer any questions you



have. Hopefully we can earn your trust.”

“You’re already well on your way there,” said Jak. “Just remain honest and we won’t turn anyone away.” Thoughts of Marek surfaced in her head. Would they turn him away? She put that out of her mind and turned to Skellig. “I’ll leave it to you then.”

Skellig nodded, and Jak began running back to the main camp. There was something exhilarating about all of this. She honestly hadn’t anticipated anyone from the army would actually come join them so soon. If anything, she had just made the offer to make them think twice about attacking. But to see them come, that was an encouraging sign. Perhaps there was still hope for their little band after all.

Though her positive thoughts had one dark streak to them. Marek. He was the biggest obstacle thrown in their path, and unexpected. Sure, it would be simple enough to just drag him along with the rest of their company. What was she going to do about him?

THE NEXT FEW weeks passed rather painlessly. No more soldiers from the queen’s army appeared, but she trusted that there were more that simply needed added assurance.

It didn’t take long before Skellig cleared the new arrivals as trustworthy. It then became Jak’s job to fulfill her promise, that of giving each of them multiple brands. She started by only giving them one brand at a time. That was partially to keep her own strength up, but also so she could meet with each of them multiple times, and get to know them better.

And from what she could tell, it was working. They were adjusting well, even after the pain of desertion. Each of them knew their decision was a good one, but that didn’t keep them from feelings of guilt, like they had betrayed their comrades. But Jak and Skellig, as well as the other members of the council, did what they could to ease the stress. For most, that meant giving them a chance to return and find others willing to join them. Skellig eventually let them do so. They were to meet at pre-arranged locations around Skyecliff and Tradehall, to coordinate the desertion of their fellow sympathetic comrades.

It would not be an easy task, though. They had already risked a lot by joining Jak, and the queen would have loyalists on the lookout for any Fae sympathizers. Jak would have gone with them if she could, but her skills were needed elsewhere.

After waiting several days more for other deserters, the council decided it was time for their group to continue their movement into the mountains. They would need to find a more defensible location, not to mention a place where they could hole up for the winter.

They continued traveling deeper and deeper into the mountains. At long last, they arrived at a split in the road, following a similar split in the river. The bulk of the river continued through the pass, but a small stream ran alongside the other, less traveled road.

"From what I remember," said Gabriel as the entire council met by the river to discuss their next moves, "The right passageway is what leads to the southern kingdoms. That's why it's far wider and the better kept of the two. The other continues through the mountains to an uninhabited valley. There used to be an old mine down that way, but after a collapse it was largely abandoned. Few have reason to go that way."

"We know the valley," said Noralim. "It's a wonderful place, with enough space for farming and plenty of water from a large lake."

"How do you know it?" asked Jak, staring down at the dwarf where he stood next to Girwirt the gnome.

"It's not far from Mt. Harafast," he clarified. "But on the opposite side from where we were. There's a small path that only us dwarves and gnomes knew about."

"Too small and narrow for you giants," added Girwirt.

"Is it defensible?" asked Skellig.

"It could be," said Noralim, clasping his hands together. "There are very few ways to get in or out. The main entrance could easily be defended with minimal effort if a fortress was built to keep out intruders. And there are enough resources to survive indefinitely inside the valley if someone laid siege. We could build such a fortress for you in no time!" He wrung his hands together, clearly excited.

"Yes, but that would take time, and we can't assume we have it." said Skellig. She turned to Gabriel. "What about the southern kingdoms. Would they welcome a group such as ours?"

Gabriel stroked his beard. "It's hard to say one way or the other. Politically, I know there isn't much love for Queen Telma since she began increasing taxes on their traded goods. That might work in our favor. But they, like everyone under Telma's rule, are susceptible to fear. And many still fear the unknown."

"Hm," Skellig ran a hand through her short hair. "I think I would still feel more secure among a people where the queen's army, not to mention demons, are less likely to bother us."

"Cain will find us wherever we are," said Jak. "I'm certain of that. He wouldn't let something like political boundaries stop him from coming after the Fae...after me."

Yewin raised one glowing hand. "I, for one, am in favor of taking the road less traveled. As long as we are given the time we need to create secure defenses, I think we stand a better chance there, where we can face any potential enemies on our terms. And if the valley is

large enough, it could be a suitable place to establish Illadar.”

He winked at Jak. Yewin hadn’t spoken much about Illadar, but he clearly believed in it. Or at least, he believed in Jak. According to Seph’s Book of Illadar, Jak bore every resemblance to the hero that would lead them there. She could only hope that she was up to the task.

“You’d have to carry us Water Fae for part of the trip,” said Cerai, where she hovered next to Amelia in a large pillar of water. “The river is thinner no matter which path we take, but if we continue through the mountains it looks like more of a trickle.”

“We have enough wagons to help with that,” said Skellig. “Though it would slow us down.”

“We will help,” the words nearly burst out of Noralim, who was bouncing up and down on his feet. Jak had rarely seen him so excited. “Once we get there, our water friends will be happy. You’ll see. The lake there is wide and deep. There’s something for everyone there. Caves! You should see the caves.”

“Excuse me,” said a voice from behind Jak.

Every head turned to see Marek approaching them. His hands were still tied together as a precaution, and a young Watcher boy came running up behind him.

“I’m sorry, sirs,” the young man said as he caught up with Marek. “He ran off while I was relieving myself. It won’t happen again.”

“Next time find someone to take the watch for you,” said Skellig through a frown. “You should know that.”

“Yes sir,” the man’s face reddened. “He just hasn’t been any trouble before now, and...”

“What did you want to say?” Jak asked. She wasn’t talking to the young Watcher, but to Marek. He had been waiting patiently for the conversation to end, but something seemed different about his posture. There was something more...intentional about it.

“I assume you’re deciding which way to go,” said Marek, nodding appreciatively at Jak. He took their silent reply as confirmation. “Where the group goes doesn’t matter to me, but Jak and I must take the path on the right.”

Jak glanced at Gabriel. That was the path that led to the southern kingdoms.

“Why do we need to go there?” Jak broke the silence first. The others were staring at Marek, clearly distrustful. Even Amelia folded her arms, staring down her nose at Marek.

“That’s where we’ll find the second Pillar of Eternity,” he said.

“The Pillar is in the southern kingdoms?” Jak asked, blinking.

“What? No, we don’t need to go that far. It’s on the top of one of the mountains. I woke up not far from there. That’s the one there.” he

pointed at a snow-capped peak. He was right, it wasn't far, but it was tall. Possibly the tallest mountain Jak had seen since Mt. Harafast.

"Mt. Knot?" asked Gabriel. "The Pillar is inside Mt. Knot?" Apparently the mountain was important enough to name.

"That's the one," said Marek. "Though I don't think it's inside. Not like the first one you found. I believe we'll find it when we reach the top. Jak and I must go there."

"She is not going anywhere alone with you," said Karlona. Jak glanced at her mother. The woman had been no more or less trustful of Marek than the rest of them, but when it came to the protection of Jak...

"It doesn't have to be the two of us. Others can come as well," said Marek. He turned to look at Jak directly. "Jak, I know all of this is hard to believe, but I need you to trust me on this. The Pillar of Eternity is there, and you know how important that is to defeat Cain. Once we have it, we can come back to meet the others wherever they end up going."

Jak sighed, not breaking eye contact with Marek. Yes, there was definitely something more urgent in his gaze this time. She had always been able to tell if he was lying. This did not seem to be one of those times.

"I think..." she paused, leaving the verdict suspended on her lips. "I think we should trust him on this one."

Karlona and Skellig frowned, but the rest of the council remained mostly unchanged in their expressions. Yewin began nodding his head slowly, which was enough confirmation to embolden Jak further. "We know none of what we do to defend this valley will have any effect on Cain if he wanted to attack us. And besides—" she turned to Skellig. "—you said you'd need time to set up the defenses. Well if I'm not with you, perhaps Cain will ignore you for now."

The moment she said it, she knew it to be true. Cain wanted her, not these others. That was evident in the momentary flashes she got of the monster, accompanied by her headaches. Those had grown increasingly more numerous over the past few weeks, and sometimes the visions grew clearer, enough for her to get a glimpse of what Cain was after. And it wasn't the Fae. Not yet, at least.

"Yes, I think that might be true," said Marek. "If Cain or his demons are following us, they will go after Jak first."

"Well, if that's your decision, Jak, then I'm going with you." Karlona put her hands on her hips. "You'll need a bodyguard, and I'm the best you've got."

"I can agree to that," Jak said. Not that she could have stopped her mother from doing something she set her mind to. "I think overall it should be a small company though, if we're hiking the mountain. We

won't have much in the way of provisions."

Skellig gave a curt nod. "I agree. A large force wouldn't help much against someone like Cain anyway, and we need as many people with the main group as possible. Especially with you gone," she looked at Jak.

"You can't count on me to save you every time," Jak said with a wink. Skellig rolled her eyes. Jak had saved her life once before, and saved all of their lives when she had decimated an army of several thousand demons at once.

Yes, perhaps it would be good for the group to live without her for a while, get a chance to build on their own, without the help of their most powerful weapon. Besides, she would still be helping them if she managed to draw Cain off, or if she found a second Pillar of Eternity.

"I want to go with you," said Seph. Jak turned to where he stood next to her.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" she said.

"I know I don't have any brands or significant combat skills. But I think this is something that I need to do. If it means finding a Pillar of Eternity then I want to help in any way I can. You might need me for what I know about them, what the Book of Illadar teaches."

Jak leveled her gaze at Seph. Was that the real reason why Seph wanted to come, or did it have something to do with her, with the fact that they were becoming something more than friends? Well, she did like the idea of having him with her. Just them and a handful of others, not having to worry about the crowds of humans and Fae. But no, Seph would be more of a hindrance than a help. It was a harsh truth, but accurate all the same.

"No, I'm sorry," she shook her head.

"But..."

"We can't risk it. Perhaps if you had a brand, even a simple one like Hungerless, we could make an exception."

Seph closed his mouth, opened it, then closed it again. Yes, he knew that trying to argue the fact would not change Jak's mind. Relics, but she hated doing that to him.

"Can I assume that's a yes, then?" Marek broke the awkward silence.

"Yes, I suppose it is," said Jak. "But don't think that I trust you yet. That still remains to be seen. But if what you say is true, and there really is a Pillar of Eternity on this Mt. Knot, then I think that will be sufficient."

He nodded. "It's there. You can keep me restrained if you want, I won't mind." He raised his arms to indicate the cords that held his hands together.

"I don't think that will be..." Jak began.

“We’ll see,” Karlona cut in. “Jak is not the one you have to convince.”

“When we get there, you’ll see,” said Marek. “Thank you for being willing.”

He said it with such sincerity that Jak truly believed him. He wanted to help, that much was clear to her.

Yet, she couldn’t shake the nagging feeling of discomfort in the back of her mind. Everything about Marek appeared, at least on the surface, like the friend she had known for so many years. But he was changed, different somehow. She just wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

Jak shook off the thought and faced Skellig. “You’ll make sure the wagons are prepared to carry the Water Fae?”

Skellig nodded, “We’ll get started right away.”

“Good,” Jak met Marek’s eyes. Those warm, inviting eyes. Yes, this was Marek. Changed perhaps, and miraculously alive, but still the young man she had known. “Then we’ll leave tomorrow morning.”

Jak slept that night for the first time in nearly a week, after spending the majority of the evening giving out a few last-minute brands. She didn't need as much sleep as she used to, thanks to a Sleeplessness brand that she gave herself a month or two prior.

After a brief meal in the morning, they were ready to depart. Skellig had already expertly arranged for most of them to begin traveling down the left path, the one that led deeper into the mountains towards this valley they hoped to find.

Jak, Marek, and Karlona, on the other hand, prepared for a long personal journey. While Jak didn't need much food or sleep, the others did. Marek had the brand of Telekinesis that Gabriel had given him in what seemed like a lifetime ago. And Karlona had her own gifts, but Fae could not receive brands like Hungerless. And Jak was not about to give Marek any extra brands. So they packed as much food and water as they could, along with extra clothes and warm blankets. They had no pack animal, so Jak took as much of it in her pack as she could. Once again, her brand of Strength came in handy. She wasn't sure how she had managed before giving herself all those other brands.

As one final preparation, she found herself looking for Gabriel. He was getting ready near the river, folding his makeshift bed and placing it on a nearby wagon. When he saw her coming, he smiled and heaved his pack onto the wagon with a groan. "Whew, these old bones are not what they once were. I think I can still feel every pebble I slept on last night."

"You know, I could give you a few extra brands, Gabriel." said Jak. "It wouldn't be a problem."

Gabriel let his mouth hang open in thought. "I don't think so, Jak. Not that I don't trust you. It's just, for now, I think it would be rather an odd adjustment for me. Call it an old man's stubborn attachment to the status quo."

"Well, along those lines, I wanted to get your help with something before we leave."

Gabriel nodded, "I had a feeling you might come to me eventually. Not that you really need my help, not anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"You want to make sure your branding techniques are accurate, yes? You want to give yourself more brands."

Jak smiled, "is it that obvious?"

"Look, brands are extraordinary gifts. We still don't fully understand their origin, but I know most people would jump at the chance to gain extra abilities like yours. I don't think it's any surprise that you include yourself in that number. You've already proven you have extraordinary abilities."

"Sometimes I feel a bit selfish by giving myself so many." Jak admitted, kicking at a pebble with her boot.

"And the fact that you feel that way is proof that you deserve what you have, that you aren't a...I don't know, a power-hungry tyrant." He winked at her.

Jak laughed. "Well, you're right. Before we leave I need every advantage I can get. I just wanted to test the brands first so you can confirm that I'm doing it correctly."

"Indeed, and which brands do you want to give yourself?"

"Toughness, Sightseeing, and Grace."

"Hm, well Toughness should be no problem. I've seen you perform it on others, so you'll be fine there. Sightseeing shouldn't be a problem either. Grace, however, is difficult to check if you got it right. Inanimate objects do not have any observable reactions when branded with Grace, even if you get it wrong."

Jak nodded. This wasn't news to her. "That's why it's one of the last brands that you learn, right?"

"Right, and the only true way to know if you got it right is to test it on a living thing. We usually have mice or some other kind of creature to start with. It's the only brand where we use animals to test if it works. Well, that and..."

"That and Blood-burning," Jak finished.

Gabriel's face hardened. "Yes, I assume you're not looking to give yourself that one?"

Jak shook her head. "I don't see why I would need it."

"You didn't mention the Void brand," he added.

Jak paused. "What would that do exactly?"

"Unclear, since no one has ever possessed it with more than one brand. It could be that it would grant you the ability to negate the brands of others. Or..."

"Or it could render all of my brands useless," Jak finished. "Thanks, but I don't think I'll risk it."

"Very well, in any case, let's see what you've got on these three?"



He turned to the sack he had just loaded onto the wagon, rummaged around, and pulled out a small crystalline flask. "I use this for collecting samples of unknown substances I find while traveling. But it also works well for testing Sightseeing. You see, if you perform it incorrectly, Sightseeing will cloud up the glass, so you can no longer see through it."

Jak accepted the glass from Gabriel. "Go on," Gabriel prompted when she didn't do anything at first.

Jak closed her eyes and focused. She had performed the Sightseer brand before, but never on a living being. She could envision the brand perfectly, but there was also something to be said about the attitude one had when branding. But she'd studied this for months. She knew what she was doing. She felt the Gifter power surge within her, and she opened her eyes just a little to see the black brand lines forming on the glass. So far so good.

When the brand finally settled into the glass, both she and Gabriel held their breaths to see what happened. The glass remained perfectly clear.

"Well, I think that settles it," Gabriel took the glass and examined it closely. "Yes, this looks good. I can't see any problem with the design. If only all of my students could pick this up so quickly."

Jak blushed. "I've been practicing in my head since I was a little girl."

"And it appears to be paying off. Now, about that Grace brand."

Jak turned all her attention to Gabriel.

"I'm not sure if we'll find a suitable animal around here for you to test. But we can start by branding a rock, and I can tell you if there's anything wrong with the brand itself."

Jak nodded and stooped to pick up a stone about the size of her fist. Then once more she concentrated, imbuing the stone with the necessary brand lines. Grace required a feeling of fluidity, of adaptability. She did her best to envision that as she worked, picturing Naem when he would fight, the way he dodged any attacks as if he had rehearsed the battle beforehand, like it was a dance.

She had avoided giving herself Grace before now, in part because of Naem. Even the smallest reminder of his prior betrayal had been enough to put her on edge. But most of that was behind her now. Naem had proven himself to be on their side, and even now was putting himself at risk to get more Fae and their sympathizers out of Skyecliff.

But now was not a time to let the past interrupt the future. If she was to be the hero everyone wanted her to be, she would need every skill, every advantage. And that included Grace.

When she finished, Gabriel took the stone and stared intently at

the markings. "This looks correct to me, I see no blemishes that would affect the results. But again, it's impossible to tell without a live subject. I would not recommend using this one on yourself until you do."

Jak licked her lips, "What happens if I get it wrong?"

"Well, Grace doesn't often kill when one gets it wrong, unless the brand is way off, which yours isn't. Most likely, you will go mad. You will become a demon."

Jak swallowed. "Perhaps I'll wait to find a rabbit or something. Try it out on that first."

"That would be my recommendation. For the other two, I think you have nothing to fear."

Jak nodded. "Very well."

A hand on her shoulder caused her to turn. It was her mother, Karlona, her Shadow Elf visage almost seeming to glow with darkness, if such a thing were possible. "Your friend and I are ready to go when you are," she said.

"I'll be along in a moment," Jak said.

Her mother gave Jak's shoulder a squeeze, exchanged a short nod with Gabriel, then retreated back the way she had come.

"Be careful out there," said Gabriel, watching Karlona go. "It's a dangerous business."

"You don't trust Marek?" Jak asked.

"It's not that I don't trust him, in fact I think he's given us no reason not to trust him. And an outlandish story like his is almost too improbable for it to be a lie. But I think a healthy fear of the unknown could be useful in a time like this. And there are a lot of unknowns. Keep on your guard."

Jak nodded, "I will. What do you think these are for?" With that, she grabbed her right forearm and activated her Gifter brand. The magic flooded through her as she began envisioning Toughness. After the mild pain of the brand lines becoming a part of her, she imagined the next one, Sightseeing. It only took a couple of seconds, but when she finished, there were two new brands on her body.

Jak's eyes widened. Suddenly she could see every strand of Gabriel's graying hair, every thread in his cloak. Staring beyond her mentor, she focused on the nearest mountain. Even though its peak was miles above, she could make out a fox trotting through the snow. And what appeared to her before as a sea of pine trees was now made up of individual branches and twigs. When she stared at the sky, she could make out a few stars, even though the sun had already risen. This was incredible!

"I see it's working," said Gabriel with a knowing smile. "Perhaps I will have to take a few new brands from you, if that's the reaction I'll

have each time.”

Jak faced her mentor, blinking as he came into focus. Something about the Sightseer brand made him look closer than he actually was. She would have to get used to that.

“Thank you for all your help, Gabriel,” she said at last. She took two steps backward, preparing to leave.

He acknowledged her with a nod. “Anytime, child. I’m only sorry I can’t help further, but you long surpassed me and my abilities.”

Jak smiled, knowing it was not true. Gabriel had a wisdom and experienced confidence that she lacked, but she appreciated the compliment anyway.

With a final wave, she turned to meet her mother at the fork in the road. The Shadow Elf stood there with Marek, who still had ropes tying his hands together. They might have to take those off. Perhaps when Jak had a chance to talk to him more, see if he was truly a danger. Maybe they could loose his hands during the day at least, and keep them tied at night.

Karlona waved a dark hand at Jak. “I see you gave yourself more brands.” She did not seem surprised.

“I figured we could use every bit of help we can get. I only wish I could give you a brand.”

“We have our own advantages that you can’t get from a brand.” said Karlona. “Though I appreciate that.”

Marek remained quiet. That was good. He could have used the opportunity to ask for an additional brand, but he didn’t.

Speaking of people who didn’t want brands, where was Seph? Jak scanned the crowd behind them. Most were busy loading the wagons, or gathering supplies. Very few looked in their direction, and she couldn’t see Seph anywhere. Had she hurt him when she told him not to come? She hoped that wasn’t the case. She liked being with him, even if it didn’t make sense for a journey like this one. Why wouldn’t he be here to see them off?

An unexpected feeling of loss pulled her good spirits downward. Well fine, if he didn’t want to see her one last time, that was for him to deal with. Perhaps some time alone would help them both get their minds straight.

She turned back to meet Marek’s eyes. Once again she saw that same youthful innocence in those eyes that she recognized from their childhood. But they were touched with a darkness, a maturity that she herself felt. There was longing there as well. She swallowed. Perhaps being in such proximity to Marek wouldn’t be a good idea after all. He had been interested in her, even if she hadn’t thought of him in that way. But that was beside the point. They were journeying with a purpose, and neither of them could let their feelings get in the way.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

“I am,” he replied.

Jak took one last look around her for Seph, but he was nowhere in sight. So instead she said, “lead the way.”

They walked for a long time in silence. Karlona remained alert, on the lookout for trouble. Marek apparently didn't feel the need to speak. So Jak let the tension hang in the air, choosing not to say anything either. She wished she'd had a chance to say goodbye to Seph. Perhaps he hadn't intentionally avoided her. Maybe he had just overslept or something. What would he do when he woke and found she was gone? Would he assume she had been avoiding *him*?

Now and then she glanced up at Mt. Knot, looming in the distance. It was a big mountain, though not as big as Mt. Harafast. Even with her newfound Sightseer brand, she still couldn't make out the details at the top of its peak. It was far too distant. It would take them some time to get all the way there. Perhaps if she used the Pillar of Eternity? But no, all that would do would be to save time. It wouldn't reduce the amount of effort to climb all that way. In fact, it would wear her out more if she used the Pillar's magic, since it had a tendency to physically drain her as she used it.

Her thoughts were interrupted as Karlona came to a sudden halt. She held out one arm, indicating the rest of them should keep still.

"What is it?" Jak whispered. She didn't hear anything but the wind whistling through the canyon. But she didn't have whatever instincts her mother had, as a Shadow Elf.

"Someone is near," her mother replied. With one hand, she slipped an obsidian dagger out of her belt.

"Could it be someone from the camp? Maybe we missed something." Jak turned to look behind them.

"No, ahead of us, around the bend."

That was unexpected. Jak brandished the Pillar of Eternity in front of her. She had her spear tied to her back, but hopefully that wouldn't be necessary. And if it was something dangerous, she could just use the Pillar to freeze time long enough to draw a weapon. Marek watched with mild interest, seemingly unworried.

"It could just be a merchant, right? They come through here," Jak added.

“Perhaps,” confirmed Karlona. “But we can’t take those chances. Stay here.”

With that, her mother disappeared. Jak sighed. The Shadow Elf magic was still something she wasn’t entirely used to, especially when the one wielding it was her mother. But it was definitely useful for situations like these. Shadow Elves made the perfect spies and assassins.

She waited for a minute or so, saying nothing, and hoping that Marek wouldn’t decide to break the silence. Thankfully, he hadn’t said much since they left, other than to thank them for agreeing to go. Jak wasn’t sure if she liked that about him or not. On the one hand, she didn’t really like the idea of trying to pretend like nothing had ever happened and go back to being friends again. On the other, it was Marek. He was the person she went to with all her troubles, the person who listened most to her when they were younger. A part of her, a big part, wanted that again. Perhaps if he was telling the truth about this Pillar of Eternity, she could come to believe his story, as outlandish as it was. At least he was cooperating fully.

She nearly jumped as Karlona materialized once again in front of her.

“What is it? Merchants or something worse?”

Karlona opened her mouth, but hesitated a moment before speaking. “I think you’d better come see for yourself.”

Curious, Jak followed Karlona around the next bend for about a hundred yards or so, with Marek trailing behind.

Not far ahead there was a trickle of smoke from a small campfire. Now that they were close enough, Jak recognized the scent of rabbit or some other small animal cooking. And rotating the dead animal on a stick was...

“Seph!” she shouted. What in the world was he doing here?

Seph waved a cheery hand, like it was completely normal to have run into them. He had a bow and arrow strapped to his back, and a travel pack like the rest of them. “Hey there.”

“What are you doing?” she asked. Karlona folded her arms, watching the two of them.

“I left during the night, while you were sleeping. You don’t sleep often so I thought I’d take the chance while I had it. I got this far and figured you’d be coming this way, so I waited.”

“Waited? You...you, why?” was all she could say. But she knew why. He told her that he wanted to come, and she refused. So he decided to take it into his own hands.

Seph placed the roasted rabbit on a rock near the fire and stood. “Jak, I know you’re probably upset.”

“Upset?” she said.

“But if you’ll give me a chance, I will make it up to you, I promise.”

“Make it up to me?” Why was she only capable of repeating what he was saying right now?

“Look, I can help. You need help carrying things, or hunting. I can do that. I made you lunch.” He waved a hand at the cooked rabbit.

Jak’s face was growing red, and she was having difficulty putting two thoughts together. In the end, she just pointed back the way they came. “I want you to go back right now.”

Seph glanced behind her. “The others have likely moved on by now.”

“So follow them. They’re a big group, they won’t be hard to find.”

“You know if you won’t let me travel with you, I’ll just follow from a distance, right?”

A frustrated growl escaped her lips, and she turned to her mother for support. To her astonishment, the woman was leaning against a nearby bolder and smiling. Smiling! This wasn’t a laughing matter. Seph could seriously slow them down, or get himself killed, or...

“It’s his decision,” said Marek from behind her. “If he wants to come, who are we to refuse that of him.”

Jak scowled. What was it with the men who took an interest in her life? One died then came back to life, one betrayed her then saved her life, and now Seph was directly going against her wishes that she *clearly* laid out for him the day before.

Maybe she could force him to go back. She could use the Pillar of Eternity to drag him to the main camp in the blink of an eye, and then leave him there, returning to Karlona and Marek just as fast. But she’d probably have to carry Seph there, as he would not go willingly. She could do it though. She had enough strength from her brands to carry him, even if he protested. But it would not be fun.

Seph waited for an answer, his arms open in an inviting gesture. He knew she could force him to go back. She could see it in the way his muscles tensed when she moved. But would she?

In the end, she began marching past Seph, kicking the rabbit into the fire on her way, and not looking back.

“I think you can take that as a yes.” Karlona spoke to Seph behind her. The woman sounded amused. Didn’t she know Seph could get himself killed out here?

“Thank you, I’ll do what I can to help,” said Seph. She didn’t need his thanks. This was his fault.

“I’d start by staying a safe distance behind,” Karlona added before beginning to follow. Jak did not turn around or say anything. She just kept her eyes fixed on the path ahead of her. Let Karlona watch over Seph and Marek. It was her job to keep them safe anyway.

They continued to walk like that for the rest of the day, Jak leading the way closer and closer to the mountain. Seph wisely said nothing more after that first encounter, and Marek said little, other than to let them know they were on the right path. Once they neared the mountain they would have to leave the main road and find a different path leading upward. But that was still at least a day's march off.

Light dimmed as the sun set in the west, though they were used to walking in low light. The sun only directly illuminated the canyon for a few hours every day, hidden for the most part by the towering walls of mountains on all sides.

Once it was dark, Marek finally spoke. "We're close to the place where I awoke. We'll need to leave the main road soon. Perhaps this would be a good place to camp for the night?"

Jak wasn't tired at all, thanks to the compound effects of her Sleeplessness, Toughness, and Strength brands. But they had been walking all day, and none of the others had what she had. Seph looked exhausted, as served him right. But even Marek and Karlona looked like they could use a break.

"Fine," she said, swinging the pack off her back. "Let's build a fire and see if we can find any animals nearby to eat."

Seph nodded and brought the bow off his back, saying nothing as he ventured off the road past a small hillock nearby. Jak didn't protest. If he wanted to travel with them, then he'd have to pitch in. It was only fair.

Marek and Karlona helped put together a fire while Jak got the rest of their provisions ready for the night.

Seph eventually arrived with more than a little rabbit this time. On his shoulders hung the body of a fully grown deer. "We're going to eat well tonight. And have some left over for the next few days too," he said cheerily as he flung the carcass down on the ground. "Mind if I borrow your knife, Karlona?"

Karlona handed the weapon to Seph without protest, who set about skinning the beast. Jak sat down near the fire. Of course he had to find a huge catch on their first night, making him look all the more valuable to the group. Though from the way Seph prepped the deer meat, it became clear that he did know what he was doing. He hadn't learned to do all that as the adopted son of the queen. Maybe it was something he picked up after he left and traveled northeast, before he discovered the Book of Illadar.

"I am told you are a religious figure of some kind," said Marek to Seph.

Seph looked up from his work and regarded the man quietly before resuming. "Yes, that about sums it up."



"You're not exactly what I would expect from a preacher."

"What did you expect?" said Seph.

"Well, I suppose I haven't had much contact with other religious leaders, but I guess I imagined them to be a bit more...like they're living in their own heads."

Seph laughed. "Yes, well, that's certainly true of some that I know. My experience turned out differently. I never had the training that they do."

"Yes, I've heard. You found some book while you were abroad, no? I would love to hear more about that."

Seph slapped a piece of meat on a hot rock that sat on the fire. It sizzled and Jak caught the first whiff of roasted flesh. Despite herself, she felt her stomach growl. Hungerless or not, that smelled good.

"I'd be happy to," said Seph, poking at the meat a bit with the knife. "I suppose we have time."

He glanced at Jak, as if asking if it was okay. While Jak did not particularly care about joining the conversation, she had cooled down since earlier. Somewhat at least. Seph definitely wasn't hearing the end of it. But if he wanted to join them, that was his problem. And she certainly wasn't going to stop him from talking to Marek. In fact, there was something relieving about having someone else for Marek to talk to, instead of her. This way she could observe her former friend interact with others. Perhaps she'd get some kind of insight.

When she said nothing to protest, Seph continued. "As you can tell, I'm originally from the eastern nations, but I was adopted by the queen when I was very young. Things never worked out well for me there, so eventually I decided to run away and go back to my own country."

Marek listened intently, and so, despite herself, did Jak. She knew Seph's story, but hadn't heard him talk about it in a while.

"Along the way, I found a book. I don't really want to describe the circumstances surrounding that discovery, as they are sacred to me, but suffice it to say, I was given a mission."

"So you came back?" Marek prompted.

"I did, though I never went back to the queen's palace. Once she learned I had returned, she sent for me, and locked me away in one of her rooms. I starved myself until she finally agreed to let me go. Eventually she just lost interest in keeping me against my will, and allowed me to leave, claiming to the public that I had to learn to be self-sufficient and wanted to prove myself by living among the people."

"And was that when you formed your little church?" Karlona asked, from where she sat.

"Not quite. Elva was the first to listen to me, and for a while it was

just the two of us. But she eventually told her friends about the book, and what it revealed. And there were rumors about Fae in the mountains. I guess that could have been the gnomes and dwarves or the Shadow Elves. Nevertheless, it increased some of the excitement surrounding the book for those who knew about it.”

Jak rubbed at her temples. Another headache was coming on, and it was not an opportune time for it. Right now, with Seph joining them and the long journey, the last thing she needed was a throbbing temple. Shouldn’t her Healing brand be able to help with things like this?

None of the others seemed to notice. “So what exactly was the book about?” Marek inquired further. He was talking more than Jak had seen since he first arrived. That was good.

Seph fished in one pocket. “I have a copy here that you can flip through. It’s a bit worn but you’ll get the idea.” He handed a small, leather-bound book to Marek, who accepted it carefully.

Seph continued, “It was written by a man called Abel, the son of our first ancestors. After Jak returned from Mt. Harafast with the Pillar of Eternity, I learned that his brother, Cain, is somehow still alive and the man behind the demons.”

“And you believe all this is true?” Marek said, flipping through the pages.

“I do, and we’ve seen some of the prophecies come true in the past two years alone. Each of the races are mentioned in one form or another, including some we have not seen yet. You can see some of them here,” he leaned over to point out a passage to Marek. “It mentions beings of light and darkness. We have one of those with us today.”

Marek looked at Karlona. “And do you believe the words of this book?”

Karlona shrugged, “I never was one for religious texts. Too easy to interpret the wrong way. But after finding an original copy of the Annals of Adam in the Hollow Peaks, and having seen some of these events play out before my very eyes, I’d say there’s something to them.”

Marek nodded, satisfied with that answer. Thankfully he did not ask Jak the same question. While she agreed with her mother, there were some troubling implications for her own destiny contained in the book’s pages. Marek turned back to Seph. “What other races are meant to appear?”

“Well, each one appears to be a sort of steward over a particular element. Water, earth, fire, and life energy, which I presume are the trolls we recently found. Other than them, we are promised others over the remaining elements: air, frost, plant life, animal life, and

spirit. There are twelve total, if we include humans.”

“What is their purpose?”

Seph opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out at first. Both Jak and Karlona stared at the young man. “That...is not clear. As I stated, they seem to be stewards over the different building blocks of our world, but we don’t necessarily know what that means, or what it’s for. I suspect it has something to do with the creation of Illadar.”

“You’ve mentioned that before, and the book is named after it. What is Illadar exactly?”

“We don’t know,” Jak said, speaking for the first time. Seph had some theories, but she had to make sure that they were just theories, nothing factual. Talk of Illadar was where she usually entered the picture, and there was too much uncertainty there to make her comfortable.

“That’s true,” said Seph, slowly. “We don’t know exactly what it is. The book describes it as a place of peace, where all twelve races will live in harmony together. So far, we haven’t found it yet.”

“Assuming it is a place,” said Jak. “And not a state of being.”

“True, it could just mean establishing peace among the land, locally. I suspect it’s something different though.”

Marek nodded, “And I suspect you are correct.” He looked directly at Jak. There was a knowing look in his eyes. Did he know that Jak was supposed to be instrumental in forming Illadar? Or at least, someone who matched a lot of Jak’s characteristics.

The book spoke of a hero, known as the Oren, who could give multiple brands and who was the key to uniting the Pillars of Eternity and creating Illadar. All evidence suggested that person was her, and many of the others had even begun calling her ‘Lady Oren.’ And when she thought about it, she supposed she was. There wasn’t much use in denying it. It was just odd to think of oneself as a fulfillment of prophecy. How often did people see a foretelling unfold in their lifetime, let alone be the one to carry it out?

Marek didn’t ask much more after that, choosing instead to read Seph’s copy of the Book of Illadar until the fire began to die. Jak kept the watch that night, since she didn’t need as much sleep like the others. But honestly, sleep might have been a happy companion, as she spent most of the night mulling over what Seph had said, and everything else that had happened during the last few days.

It was a lot to process, but at least things were simpler now. She could focus on a single task, getting the Pillar of Eternity. With that, perhaps their jobs would be a little easier. Or at least her job would be. She did not envy the task Skellig would have in leading everyone without herself and Karlona to help manage things.

But perhaps it was for the best. Because as much as Jak could help

the Fae, she was also a liability. Jak rubbed at her temples more, trying to massage the ache out. But it only seemed to get worse the more she kept at it. The dying embers pulsed in time with the blood throbbing in her head.

“Hello, Jak.”

Jak scrambled to her feet, ignoring the sudden spike of pain in her head from the effort. Her eyes were fixed on the figure standing just on the other side of the dying fire. He was of a large build, and with wavy blonde hair.

“Cain.”

Jak shot to her feet, looking around wildly for the Pillar of Eternity. She had left it lying near the tent. Stupid! How could she have been so negligent. She lunged, hoping that she could somehow dodge any incoming attacks from Cain. But no attacks came.

Her hands closed on the metallic finish of the Pillar, and she whirled around to bring it to bear on her enemy.

Cain had not moved. He only stared at her with a mixture of amusement and disdain.

Karlona, on the other hand, had been roused by Jak's sudden movements. "What's wrong, Jak?" she said, her daggers out and spinning to see the threat that had spooked Jak.

But she did not see Cain. Letting her guard fall, Jak realized what was happening. Cain wasn't really here. He was communicating with her as he had before.

"It was nothing, mother," she said. "You don't have to worry. A fox startled me is all. I'm going to take a short walk. Clear my head for a bit." She did not take her eyes away from Cain, who waited with arms folded, a sly smile on his lips.

She didn't give her mother time to agree or protest, but began walking forward, moving right through the apparition of Cain, and a safe distance away before turning again to face the monster of a man. He, or at least his image, had followed her away from the small camp.

"Why are you here?" she asked, through gritted teeth.

"Much more confident when you know I'm not actually there," he said, glancing around the place. "An interesting setting you find yourself in."

Jak swallowed. She had to keep him from knowing what they were doing, or where they were. "You've never seen the Hollow Peaks before?"

Cain laughed, a deep bellowing sound. "You are a terrible liar," he said. "I know exactly where you are. And I know why."

Jak's heart chilled. But she said nothing. Perhaps Cain was lying in an attempt to get more information out of her. She could not give him

that chance.

“You have proven yourself quite resourceful, young Jak. It’s a shame that you never agreed to join me back in the mountain. The things we could have done together. But all that is past. I will hunt you down sooner or later, and I will make you pay for all the pain you have caused me.”

Jak almost wanted to snort. The pain she had caused *him*? What about what he had done to her, not to mention the gnomes, the dwarves, and probably countless others? But just as she was about to say as much, something caught her off guard.

Cain’s image...flickered slightly. For a moment, she saw a wretched creature, covered in flesh that appeared to have melted all over, further covered in glowing lines. It was the same image she had seen of Cain before, at other times when her headaches worsened.

But as quickly as it came, the image vanished, replaced by the more handsome Cain that she had first come to know. Cain seemed not to have noticed the change. Could that hideous thing be what Cain truly looked like now? She had always known he would get away from that fight with the dragon, even if it began in an erupting volcano. But she hadn’t given thought to any injuries he might have obtained. Good. Anything that could give them an advantage, however slight, was something she could get behind.

“Why are you talking to me?” Jak said. “If you know what I’m doing, why not come here yourself?”

“All in good time,” he said. “But I needed to test out this connection of ours. A curious thing, isn’t it? Perhaps it has something to do with us being the only Orens currently living. The first, and the last.”

“We spoke like this long before you knew I was an Oren.”

“That was different, I initiated that conversation. And I am capable of far more. But no, I’m talking about more recently. You’ve been having visions of me. I suspect they’re accompanied by a rather uncomfortable pain in the head.”

Jak swallowed. Just how much did Cain know?

“That’s how I found out about where you are, and what you’re doing,” he said, matter of factly. “A rather useful ability. But unfortunately, one that I cannot allow to continue.”

“Why not?” Jak narrowed her eyes at Cain. Something bothered her, a feeling like watching a snake about to strike. “If you get to spy on me, what does it serve you to stop?”

“Because it appears that ability goes both ways. I cannot have you knowing what I have planned, that simply would not do. So I came to sever the connection.”

Then, he vanished.

Jak blinked, but in a split second he had appeared again, closer to her this time. He was no longer the handsome, muscular Cain, but the demon-like mess of melted flesh. Before she could react, two hands reached for her head, and passed right through.

Pain lanced through her forehead, like her earlier headaches only much, much worse. She screamed, but the lungful of air quickly escaped her. She tried to pull away, but her muscles would not respond. They all remained taut as Cain played with her head.

When he was finished, he removed his ethereal hands from inside her skull, and the pain deadened to a throbbing echo of what it had been.

"I will see you again soon," he said, his voice a raspy growl now that she could see his true form. He vanished.

Howls echoed down the length of the canyon. At first, Jak had trouble recognizing that they were real. Actual sounds coming from all around her. Those were not wolf howls.

Those were demons.

Sprinting, she pushed herself back toward the camp with as much speed as she could muster. Something was attacking. Perhaps this had been Cain's plan all along, distract her long enough for his children to arrive and kill the others. Why had she left them?

She rounded a bend and saw all three of her companions on their feet, awakened by the howls, or by her earlier scream.

Seph caught sight of her first in the moonlight, and his face softened with relief upon seeing her. He said something to Karlona, who turned to find a glimpse of Jak.

But just as she did so, another figure leaped out of the darkness. It fell on Karlona.

The woman wasted no time in fighting off the demon attack. She allowed herself to fall, kicking upward at the demon as she did so. It flew off of her, and she landed on the ground in a graceful roll, both daggers out.

Jak activated her Flamedancer brand, shooting a burst of fire onto the ground at their fireplace. What remained of the wood on the fire burst to life again, giving them a better glimpse of the figures around them.

More demons came at them from all sides, running on all fours. They hurtled down the paths, and climbed down the cliff sides like animals. Many of them.

With a tap of the Pillar of Eternity on the ground, Jak stopped time. Everything froze. Her mother paused in mid-stride as she faced the next oncoming demon. Seph was notching an arrow to his bow. Marek was doing his best to get out of the way of an oncoming demon. His hands were still tied, and he had no weapon.

The Pillar of Eternity would not let her kill, even a demon. So she had to use it wisely. She had to use it to get to her spear.

Running, despite the fact that she did not need to do so when time stood still, she came up next to her pack. The spear still lay there, next to the rest of her things. The shaft was polished and gilded, a work of art reserved only for the elite of the Watchers. It had belonged to her father and had somehow survived with Jak to this day. She picked it up in her free hand, and replaced it with the Pillar of Eternity.

As soon as her fingers left the powerful Relic, time began again. Howls surrounded her on all sides.

A demon leapt at her. Instinctively, she sidestepped and redirected its motion with the length of her spear. Thanks to Naem for teaching her that one. With a Strength-enhanced blow, she brought the butt of the spear to bear on the demon like a club. It crumpled as its skull cracked.

Panic struck her as she saw a demon hurl itself at Marek. Restrained as he was, Marek could only raise his bound arms to try and catch the demon as it barrelled into him. Together they fell, with Marek's hands holding the demon by its throat, barely managing to keep its jaws from closing on his face. The demon's claws raked into Marek's arms, and he yelled in pain.

Ignoring the others for now, Jak leapt over the nearest demon, throwing a jet of fire at it as she did so. A scorching sound and the demon's yelp were the only clues as to its fate. She was focused on the demon attacking Marek.

She thrust her spear forward, hitting its mark in the demon's side. Then she grabbed it with Telekinesis and lifted it into the air. It was already bleeding from the wound in its side, but it still snapped at thin air as she raised it up so it could do no more harm. Then she opened her mouth and shot a jet of fire at the beast. It consumed the creature, and its screams faded to nothing as the flames engulfed it.

She looked down at Marek. He was okay, apart from the wounds in his arms. He gave her the slightest appreciative nod before she switched her attention back to the rest of their group. Karlona was doing fine, weaving in and out of visibility so that Jak could barely even make out where she was at times. And neither could the demons, who fell one by one as her daggers found their marks.

Seph loosed shot after shot at the demons. But while the man was good at hunting, shooting at a fast, close ranged attacker was an entirely different scenario. He had only survived this long because most of the demons were focused on Jak or Karlona.

Taking a few steps forward so as to get in a position where she could easily stave off any demons coming at Seph or Marek, she continued the fight. One by one, the demons fell. But it wasn't an



army of demons like they had faced on the fields near Riverbrook. And Jak was no easy opponent. Soon enough, she and her mother dispatched the last of the approaching demons, and the canyon dipped into silence. It was an odd silence after all that howling and killing. It didn't seem right.

Karlona was panting, as were the others. Jak was pretty spent too, though some of her brands managed to make up for that. She could keep going for a while yet. The sun was already brightening the sky, meaning their little battle must have lasted longer than she anticipated. It had been dark when Cain first appeared to her.

Cain. She put a hand to her head, where his ghostly form had touched her. What had the man done, and would she recover? From what he had said, he was only breaking the link between them. And, blessedly, the pain had diminished somewhat. That was a good sign at least. But had he done anything more to her? Was he even capable of doing more while he spoke to her remotely? If so, that was a troubling thought.

"We have to get moving," Jak said, after they all took a moment to catch their breath. "Cain knows where we are, and he knows what we're doing. We have to get to the Pillar of Eternity before he does."

They did not question how she knew these things, but each set about collecting their things as quickly as possible.

When they had finished, Marek raised both of his bound hands to point to the road ahead. "There's a path that breaks off from the main road just ahead there. We can take that to start climbing the mountain."

Jak nodded, "then that's where we need to go." Taking two steps toward her old friend, she hoisted her spear so she only held the top portion of it. With that, she grabbed Marek's hands and sliced the cords that bound them.

Marek stared at his hands, bringing them in front of his face, then he met Jak's eyes. "Why?"

"You almost died back there, and we need you alive," said Jak. "Besides, it will be difficult to climb without the proper use of your hands."

Marek nodded. "Thank you."

"Though may I ask, why didn't you use your Telekinesis brand on that demon? You have it."

Marek shrugged, "I guess I didn't really think of it at the time. I never did have much training with it since Gabriel first gave it to me."

That was true. Generally a Telekinetic required a five-year apprenticeship, but Marek hadn't had that. He had trained for a few weeks under a Watcher, but that hadn't served him much. Jak forgot how little time it took for her to pick things up. Perhaps it had to do

with the fact that she had already trained extensively in one brand before she got more. Perhaps familiarity with one brand was enough to become easily accustomed to others. She would have to check in with those she had given extra brands, to see if they could report the same.

Together, they quickly found the path leading upward and began their climb. The terrain wasn't too difficult at first, just a steady climb up a steep incline. Someone had made the trail sometime in the past. It had several, easy-to-follow switchbacks. But as time went on, the trail grew fainter and fainter. It was doubtful that many ever got very far.

Another howl sounded behind them. It lingered in the air, the sound echoing across countless mountain walls. Each of them froze, listening.

“**T**hat was another demon,” said Karlona.

“They’re probably hunting us,” said Seph. “They’ll find our scent and catch up quickly at the rate they run.”

Jak surveyed the area around them. It was not a good place to have a battle. They were on a rocky outcropping that wrapped around the mountain, and there was a lot of loose dirt and rock. If they slipped or the rock gave way, they could slide halfway back down the mountain. There wasn’t a good place to maintain a solid footing, much less keep a bunch of demons off their tail. And Jak could no longer clearly make out a man-made trail.

“You sure this is the right way, Marek?” she said, trying to find the best way to push forward quickly.

“Positive,” he replied. “Perhaps if we can come around the south side of the mountain, we might have a better place to set up some defenses. At least the sun would be in their eyes, not ours.”

It wasn’t much to go on, but it was all they had for now. Jak began pushing forward as another howl reached her ears. This time it was closer. Were they going to have to deal with demons on the entire climb? If the demons came on them at the wrong moment, it could all be over for them. But perhaps if she could buy them more time...

“I have an idea,” she said. With a tap of her staff on the ground, she activated the power of the Pillar of Eternity. The expressions on Marek, Seph and Karlona’s faces froze in place as time stilled around her.

She took in a deep breath. There was something relaxing about using the Pillar of Eternity. The way it bent time provided her with a feeling of respite. It gave her a chance to think while demons bore down on them.

She came close to Seph, and took his hand. Instantly, he joined her in the time bubble. He took one step back as, to his eyes, Jak instantly disappeared and reappeared right next to him. After a moment, his face relaxed as he realized what was happening.

“You’re using the staff. Smart. That should give us some time to

get away from the demons.”

“It’s just to give us a head start, and possibly keep them from finding our scent. I can’t keep it up indefinitely.”

Seph nodded. “Understandable. I’m honored that you decided to take me first.” He flashed that dazzling grin of his and winked. Despite herself, she felt her cheeks redden. He could be disarming that way.

“I thought it best to start with the weakest,” she winked back at him.

“Ouch. But fair. I guess it’s my fault for refusing a brand all these years.”

“Actually, I’m not taking you alone. If you take their hands I can bring all of you into the bubble. We can go together. But since it’s just the two of us now,” she moved a little closer, tightening her grip on his hand. They kissed briefly, before something he had said brought her back to reality. “Remind me again why you do that? Refuse to take a brand?”

“Well,” Seph brought his free hand up to his neck. “To be honest, it was something I was told not to do.”

“By whom?” she asked.

“I...” he hesitated. There was something holding him back, she could tell. She waited patiently, though she was increasingly aware that they needed to move soon. She could spare a moment or two, however. When he finally spoke again, it was in a softer, more serious tone. “Do you remember when I told you about how I found the book of Illadar?”

“You said you wouldn’t tell us the specifics, that it was sacred to you.”

“It was, and...well I guess I don’t mind telling you some of it. Just you though, please don’t tell the others.”

She looked to him, taking a moment to stare into his eyes. He was serious. “I promise.” she said, and meant it.

“There were a lot of things that happened, but part of it involved a vision I had. I saw a woman, dressed all in white. She pointed me in the direction I needed to go.”

“And she also told you not to take a brand?” Jak asked. She stopped herself from raising an eyebrow. It wasn’t all that unusual to see a person dressed in white. There were some interesting religious sects out there, and this woman could have been from any one of them. But she kept her skepticism to herself. Seph was being vulnerable in telling her this. The least she could do was listen with an open mind.

“Yes, she did. She said I needed to keep myself unbiased for what was to come.”

“So branding yourself is biased?” This time she did raise an

eyebrow at him.

“Not exactly, no. But they can lead you down one path or another. For some, that is fine. That is the path they want, or even need. But I was told I couldn’t do that if I was to be prepared for what was to come.”

“And what did she say was to come.”

“She wouldn’t go into much detail on that front, said it could disrupt the future. In fact, a lot of what she said didn’t make much sense to me.”

“Hm,” Jak thought it through. “And you just believed this woman?” she asked. “Was there nothing else special about her? Something that set her apart from just a woman wearing white.”

“Well...yes,” he hesitated again. He looked like he was trying to make up his mind about something.

“You can tell me,” she encouraged. “I promise I won’t laugh or anything, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

He didn’t say anything at first, long enough for Jak to wonder if she should repeat herself. Finally, he opened his mouth to speak again.

“She wasn’t just dressed in white. She was...light itself. She appeared above me, while I was praying. And...when she was finished she just...disappeared.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she just vanished. In a bright flash of light. I can’t really explain it. For the longest time I thought I had eaten a bad weed, or dreamed the whole thing.”

“And are you sure you didn’t?”

“I am, because I later went to the place she had described and found the book there. If she was right about that, perhaps she was right about other things as well.”

It was time to be moving, and Jak knew it, though she didn’t want to stop him from talking just yet. She placed her free hand on his neck for emphasis. “Thank you for telling me this,” she said, meeting his eyes.

“I...you’re the first person I’ve told this much. I should thank you for listening.”

“It’s quite a story, but it’s not like we haven’t seen stranger things in the past year or so,” she smiled at him, then winked. “I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt.”

He smiled back at her. That face was ten times more attractive when he did that. Then pulling her close, he kissed her. It was the first time he had ever initiated a kiss. It was nice. She spared just enough mental energy to keep hold of the Pillar of Eternity, while the rest of her pressed up against him. One of his arms reached around her,

pulling her in tighter, while the other reached for her face. It still wasn't the hot and passionate way that Naem had kissed her, but there was something infinitely more enjoyable about the way Seph did it. With him, from the way his fingers caressed her face and neck, to the way he held her firmly but not too tight, she could tell he truly cared.

Once again, she was grateful for the Pillar of Eternity's ability to stop time. She needed this moment to last, and she let it.

When they finally broke the kiss, she licked her lips and smiled. "Nice talk," she said, playfully. "We'll have to do it again sometime."

Seph chuckled. "I think I'd like that."

"We, um, have to bring the others in now."

He gave an acknowledging nod, and reached to one side to grasp Karlona's hand. Instantly Karlona blinked as she was brought into the time bubble.

After Jak explained what they were doing, Karlona acknowledged her with a nod and grabbed Marek's fingers to bring him into the bubble as well. Marek's face showed a mixture of wonder and nervousness as he realized what was going on.

"This is incredible," he said, reaching out to a leaf that hung suspended in mid-air.

Jak was used to the effect by now, but she let Marek have just enough time to enjoy the moment before they set out.

They walked for some time, awkwardly at first, since they had to continue holding each other's hand for the Pillar of Eternity to work for all of them. Occasionally, someone would slip and fall out of the time bubble, requiring them to stop and re-establish physical contact before they could move on.

"This magic really is amazing," said Marek as they continued their journey. "I'm surprised you haven't defeated Cain already, or taken over the entire nation by now."

Jak was about to respond and say that the magic was more complicated than that, but before she could say a word the world lurched around her.

Instantly, she nearly lost her balance as her body was thrown forward by something in the staff's power. Where the world had stood still just moments before, motion exploded around them. Birds flew through the air, but at a speed far greater than they were capable of. Trees further down the mountain swayed in the wind, but faster, back and forth, back and forth, like they were caught in some strange kind of dance.

Jak glanced at the Relic in her hands. It pulsed with a bright light shining out of its runes, shining in such an intense way that it gave the impression that something wanted to get out. And with the world responding the way it was...time was speeding up instead of slowing

down.

As quickly as it had come, the glowing in the staff stopped and time froze once again.

“What was that?” Karlona said once everything had calmed down.

“I...” Jak considered letting go of the staff. “I don’t know. We’d better find a good place to let go.”

Still holding each other’s hand, they ran ahead. They still weren’t far enough away from the demon cries they had heard earlier. Not far enough for comfort anyway. And with all that time that had just passed, they had lost some of their advantage. If time sped up again, who knew what could happen? The demons could attack them from behind and they’d be moving too fast for Jak and her companions to realize what happened. What would that be like for the demons, to see them suspended there, barely moving?

The world heaved around them once more, the passage of time increasing in a moment. But this time they were running when it happened. The sudden change caused a shift in momentum that threw Jak off her feet in a blink of an eye. She fell face forward to the rocky ground. The Pillar flew from her hand, and her grip on Seph’s hand loosened as well.

Time sprang back to a normal pace, just as Jak’s head connected with a large rock, and everything went white.

She had lost consciousness before, but this time something was

different. To start with, she was still thinking straight. That usually didn't happen when she was hit on the head before. Usually when you get knocked out, there's a sort of dullness that accompanies the sensation of waking up, and a sense of not knowing where you were. That wasn't the case at all. Well, at least she had clarity this time. Her mind wasn't foggy at all, though she legitimately did not know where she was anymore. That much was the same.

She stood in what looked like a white corridor, like something she would see in the queen's palace, but blanketed in a soft, white glow. She was still dressed the same, but her spear and the Pillar of Eternity were gone. She scanned all around to see where they could have gone.

"Another has come," said a gentle voice from behind her. She spun, but did not see the source of the voice.

"Who's there?" she called. Her voice bounced off the walls of the strange hallway, echoing for some time after she spoke.

"But this one is different. It already has one," said a different voice, this one slightly more high-pitched. Once again, it seemed to come from behind her, but when she turned to look, it wasn't there either. Yet there seemed to be some kind of shadow in the corner of her vision. If she didn't try too hard to see it, she thought she could just make it out.

"Why can't I see you?"

"Impatient though, like the last one. Never living in the present."

Jak paused. What was happening here? The last thing she knew was that she hit her head on a rock, and in the next moment, she had come here.

She stared down the hallway. Well if the voices weren't answering, she could only push forward and maybe find some answers ahead. She took one step, then another. She couldn't make out the end of the corridor, but there had to be an ending, right?

"Oh, that's interesting," said the second voice. "The other one didn't do that before. He just yelled at us until he was blue in the



face.”

“Hello?” Jak said. “I can hear you, can you please explain what’s going on?”

“Well, she did say please,” said the second voice.

“We are your guides,” said the first voice. “My name is Perchel. You are here because you seek a Pillar of Eternity.”

Jak froze. “What do you know of them?”

“We know much, but also nothing at all,” said the voice. “Why do you seek its strength?”

“I want to help people,” Jak said to open air. “There are others depending on me. I need the Pillar to help me defend against our enemies and build a place of peace.”

The second voice piped up again. “Well, she makes it sound so simple when she puts it like that.”

“Quiet, Harglim,” said the first voice. Then his attention focused again on Jak. “You will not see us, not yet. But we are to be the shepherds in your preparations.”

“What preparations?” she asked.

“To see if you are ready to take up the Pillar of Eternity, of course.”

Jak took a deep breath. Okay, this was good. Whatever had just happened, it didn’t appear to be a bad thing, at least not yet. Perhaps if she could pass whatever these ‘preparations’ entailed, she could actually achieve their goals sooner than they thought.

“Where are my friends?”

“They are not in any danger. You will be returned to them in time.”

“And I don’t suppose you could just give me the Pillar?” she asked, knowing what the answer would be.

“Oh, I’m afraid not. You seem like a decent person, but it’s not ours to give, nor do we make the final decision.”

“Who does?”

“Why, the Pillar of Eternity, of course. It speaks the will of the Guiding Hand.”

Jak nodded to herself. That fit with what she knew of the Pillars so far. The first one had even spoken to her when Mt. Harafast had erupted and she had gone back to save Skellig. Perhaps this was a similar phenomenon.

She looked back at her surroundings. “What is this place?”

“This is an in between place. It exists outside of time and space,” said the voice. “When you are ready, we will take you to the first part of your preparations.”

Jak squared her shoulders. Well, there was no point in dawdling. “I am ready.”

The bright light of the hallway grew brighter, illuminating everything until she could see no more.



SHE WAS in a cave that contrasted starkly with the bright light of the room she had just left. It was dark, almost completely dark, yet she could make out some small details from the light of a fire. The light came from...there, several torches held up by men and women. Not just one, there were several of them. She squinted at the newcomers. There wasn't anything particularly remarkable about them. They didn't have the look of bandits or any other sort one might find in caves like these. They looked more like ordinary folk, more like...

Her eyes narrowed as the flickering firelight fell on a woman, with a round belly that suggested several months of pregnancy. There was something familiar about her.

She put up both her hands. "Hello?" No response. Each member of the party continued walking down the stone corridor as if they hadn't heard her.

"Some parts are merely vision," said the strange voice behind her. "At other times, you will be able to interact with them, but not all."

"Okay, so what am I supposed to see?" she said.

"Keep watching, and you're sure to find out."

Jak turned her attention back to the familiar-looking woman. She took a step forward to get a little closer.

"I can feel it," said a voice at the front of the group. "There is definitely something here."

They continued some distance down the stone corridor. She was going to have to move if she wanted to keep up with them.

She tiptoed forward, trying to remain as silent as possible before remembering that they could not hear her. In the end, she fell into step behind the last of the group. Could she push past? Would that even work in a vision? She wanted to get a glimpse of that pregnant woman near the front. Perhaps if she moved ahead, she would just...pass through the bodies or something. She reached out a hand to the nearest person to see if he was corporeal or not.

"There's structure here," said a female voice from up ahead.

Jak's hand froze just shy of the man in front of her. She knew that voice. There was something softer about it, younger, but there was no mistaking...

"Karlona, I think you're right," said the male voice from up ahead. "That's not a stalactite, it's a column. You can see the seams. But look at those markings."

The others crowded around the speakers, including Jak. She needed another glimpse of the woman who was her mother. But how? She didn't look anything like a Shadow Elf, and the Karlona she knew was not pregnant. And how had she ended up in a cave. Perhaps this vision wasn't real, but a representation of something else.

"It's old," came Karlona's voice. "And there are more columns here, in a pattern. It looks like it's leading to something. In fact, is that an entrance of some kind?"

Those in the front of the group hurried forward, with those in the back trailing close behind, including Jak. Though the others couldn't see her, something made Jak feel like she was a part of this, like she was a member of the expedition.

As they moved, Jak saw the columns the others had talked about. Yes, those definitely looked man-made, though they blended almost seamlessly with the rock around them. And just up ahead she could see the others beginning to funnel into a stone doorway made of smooth, clean-cut stone.

She recognized that archway.

In a moment, it all fell into place. She wasn't seeing her mother as she was now. This was the past. They were in the Hollow Peaks! Which meant that Karlona's pregnancy had to mean this was just months or weeks before Jak was born.

"There's something ahead of us," a voice shouted. It was muffled, coming from the other side of the stone archway. "It's the Pillar of Eternity, it has to be!"

Jak didn't follow them inside. She knew what lay there, and it wasn't a Pillar of Eternity, though it was a Relic of great power. The Relic that started all of this.

In a rush of spontaneous power, a great wind swept out of the stone archway and through the corridor. In the blink of an eye, the torches carried by the expedition flickered and died. The entire cavern was plunged into complete darkness.

Panicked shouts echoed all around Jak. Though she had an idea of what was happening, she couldn't help but take a step back. This was the moment that it happened.

"Someone," she heard her mother's voice yell above the others. "Get the torches lit again. Vander, you're a Flamedancer, see if you can give us some light."

"I...I'm trying," came another voice, youthful and lacking the gruffness Jak was used to hearing. But there was no mistaking that voice. That was Vander, another surviving member of the Shadow Elves. "I can't seem to get my brand to work."

"No one else is a Flamedancer, Vander. Try again."

"I can't!" the voice came out in a panicked wail. This prompted a

chorus of renewed shouting and scrambling. Calls of 'someone find the flint,' or 'I need to get out of here' ran through the cavern.

Jak merely listened. She knew why Vander couldn't use his Flamedancer brand. They would all soon discover that their brands were no longer of use to them. Because brands no longer worked once you became a Fae.

"Oh, thank the ancestors. Who lit their torch?" said Karlona.

The shouting and chaos died down as others registered what she had said. Finally, the man who appeared to be leading the expedition spoke up. "I don't think anyone lit a fire."

Indeed, Jak could still see nothing in the darkness. She couldn't have seen her own hand if she waved it mere inches in front of her face.

"But I can see?" said Karlona. "What's going on?"

"Wait!" said Vander. "I see something too."

One by one, the rest of them began acknowledging that they could also see, despite the darkness.

"That is all you are meant for here," the disembodied voice spoke to Jak once again. She resisted the urge to turn again and try to find the source of the voice.

She covered her eyes as the darkness gave way to white light. For a moment, there seemed to be nothing but the light. Then it faded to nothing, and she was left standing somewhere completely different.

She let her eyes adjust to her surroundings, blinking back the afterglow of the sudden brightness. It took a moment before she noticed that the Pillar of Eternity was back in her hands, its polished surface gleaming in the cool light of morning.

She stood in a small town, not all that different from Riverbrook, though the roofs weren't thatched. Instead the buildings were covered with curious tiles made of what looked like wood. And in the distance she could see where all that wood came from. An enormous forest rose in the distance, with trees that would have towered over her had she stood next to them. She had never seen so many trees in all her life. They had trees in the mountains, but she had grown up in the grasslands. Never had she laid eyes on a real forest before.

Several people were walking through the dirt streets, some carrying wagon loads of supplies, others going in and out of what looked like a general store and a drinking establishment with an inn of some kind.

She glanced at a wagon pulled by several oxen. Felled trees lay on the wagon, cut into great long sections, but still enormous compared to what Jak was used to seeing. Unlike the previous vision, this was definitely a place she had never visited before.

"Where have you taken me?" she said aloud to her invisible guides.

She received no response. Instead, the wagon driver glanced at her, frowned, then continued onward with a further glance or two in her direction.

They could see her this time. This wasn't purely a vision. So did that mean that this was really happening? Had she somehow been transported away from the mountain? And to where?

She placed the tip of the Pillar of Eternity into the ground, using it as a walking stick as she stepped forward towards the small village. It was a little larger than Riverbrook, and there were definitely more people going back and forth on whatever business they had. Well, the inn would probably be a good place to start if she wanted answers. She began taking long strides to close the distance between her and

the larger building.

A bell chimed as she pushed open the large door. Yes, she could definitely interact with her environment now. This was more than a vision.

Several men and women sat at tables inside, and footsteps sounded from the floor above. It was a busy establishment.

"Haven't seen you before?" said a voice in front of her. She blinked as her eyes adjusted to the darkness inside. "Looking for a room? It's early but we have a bed that'll be available in a few hours."

As she had when hearing her mother speak in the previous vision, she recognized the voice.

Yewin stood at a long counter, running a wet rag through a mug in his hand, before setting that down and picking up another to do the same. Though he did not have his characteristic glow, there was no mistaking his sharp cheekbones and long blonde hair. It was him.

"Yewin," she said before she hastily brought a hand to her mouth.

The man looked up to get a good look at her. "Do I..."

But the rest of his words were cut off as his eyes went wide. Jak knew immediately what he was looking at. His eyes glanced to the brands on her arms and face.

"Demon..." he said in a hushed tone.

The scrape of chairs against the wooden floorboards sounded as several men in the bar got to their feet, their heads coming round to fix on Jak. Some reached for weapons.

"Wait!" Jak cried. "I'm not a demon. It's a long story."

Yewin narrowed his eyes at her. "How is that even possible?"

"Look, I'm talking to you, aren't I?" she said. "Demons don't talk."

Nobody moved a muscle, though Jak kept a wary eye on the hands of some of the customers. She didn't immediately see any combat brands in the room, but she couldn't make out everyone. And several bore axes, knives, or other weapons. If one of them threw something at her, she would have to act fast to activate the Pillar of Eternity or dodge out of the way.

Yewin, to his credit, relaxed just a bit, enough for Jak to notice. "Well, you seem relatively sane, though how, I cannot tell. But if it's all the same to you, I'd like to ask you to leave." She felt her spirits drop. Was everyone afraid of the unknown?

Of course, she couldn't blame them. No one here would have ever met a Fae, and every creature that survived multiple brands turned into a demon. They had no reason to think she would be any different. But still, something about being turned away by someone she knew as a friend, that hurt.

"I'll leave," she said, glancing around the room. No one had moved from where they sat or stood, but all remained tense. She took a few

steps backward, reaching one hand to find the door handle. Then in a moment, she was out.

Once outside, she took a heartbeat to lean against the door as it closed behind her. She had all but forgotten just how strange it was that she had multiple brands. Of course they would look at her that way. How had she expected anything less. Was this part of her test, to remind her of what she was, or of how others viewed her? But no, that didn't make a lot of sense. The way people treated the Fae was enough to keep such topics on the forefront of her mind. She knew how people treated what they feared. This was nothing new.

About four people began approaching the inn. They were dressed like warriors. Not just that. They were wearing red tunics and polished armor. These weren't just soldiers, they were Watchers.

Jak quickly turned aside and began walking in the opposite direction, doing her best to hide her face. She needed to find some mud or something to cover up the Telekinesis brand on her forehead. She could cover the rest with a cloak, but that particular brand stood out.

She heard the door swing open behind her as the Watchers entered the inn. If Watchers were here, where were the others? Perhaps these were sent ahead of a large band, to arrange a place to stay.

Almost the instant the door closed, it opened again. "Hey!" said a voice. "You, stop in the name of the queen."

Jak kept her face fixed on the path ahead of her, increasing her pace and lifting the Pillar of Eternity so she carried it alongside her instead of using it for a staff. Those inside the inn must have just told the Watchers about her. If they tried to apprehend her, she would either have to fight them or run. She did not feel like the former. They were only doing what they thought was best.

"I said stop!" said the Watcher. A scuffle of boots on the wood deck suggested that more had joined the speaker. "Come back here."

There was nothing to do but run. Forgetting everyone watching, she sprinted forward.

The Watcher cursed and she spared a glance to see all four of the armed men leap after her. They were in heavy armor, and likely fatigued from their journey, so she could probably outrun them. But then again, it would take time, and she had the feeling that running away from the village was not part of the test. Besides, she had a better idea.

She darted around a small cottage and with a flash of thought, she activated the Pillar of Eternity. Time ground to a halt around her, and she slowed her gait.

She retraced her steps, passing the Watchers that now moved at a snail's pace, heading towards her last known location. She went back

to the inn, where the door had not yet swung fully shut.

What was the point of coming here? This was obviously a point before Yewin and the others had changed to come Bright Fae, or Elves as they were now called. But if she remembered correctly, shortly after becoming Fae, the Watchers under Kuldain's command had appeared. Maybe the four that pursued her were the first of that company. But if that were true, then the transformation would have to happen soon.

When she had asked Yewin about his transformation, he had never responded with a satisfying answer. In all other cases, the change had been brought on by a nearby Relic. The power of that Relic somehow triggered a change in certain people, but that did not seem to be the case here. Or at least, maybe they just didn't know about it. Perhaps this was her opportunity to find the Relic and put together that peace of the puzzle.

Yes, that was a good idea. She would have to keep using the Pillar of Eternity to keep the Watchers from chasing her, but she could live with that. If she was quick enough, the Pillar wouldn't drain her energy enough to cause a problem. And the two ethereal voices weren't saying anything, so it was all she had to go on for now.

So she spent the next little while roaming around the village, wandering in and out of the individual cottages and shops. It felt weird just letting herself into each building. Something felt wrong about the intrusion, but of course nobody could see her at the fast pace at which she was moving. Yet search as she might, she didn't come across anything that even hinted at a Relic.

She found herself back at the inn, gently pulling on the door to widen the space and slipping inside. Once inside she studied Yewin's face. He was frozen in an expression of confused curiosity, staring out the door at the Watchers that, for him, would have just left.

If Yewin said that there wasn't a Relic, then they must not have found such a thing. So where could their transformation have come from?

There was something off about Yewin's expression. Yes, he looked confused but there was more to it than that. Jak took a few steps closer, gazing at his face. There was almost...some kind of pain in his face. A quick glance at the others told her that they felt something similar.

Carefully, she willed the Pillar of Eternity to speed up time just enough to see their expressions continue to change. In slow motion, Yewin's face contorted, he doubled over, clutching at his chest, and his eyes widened in surprise.

Others in the room were having similar reactions, most of them bent over, some falling and clutching at nearby tables. Some were



raising their hands in front of their faces. They were beginning to give off a soft glow.

Jak brought time back to a crawl, taking her time to observe the room. This was it. They were changing right before her eyes. They were becoming Fae.

But what had triggered it?

"The lesson is this," she nearly jumped as a voice reached out to her from behind. She knew if she looked, she would see no one there. "Change is necessary, and sometimes it requires an additional push."

"I don't understand," she said aloud.

"It was destiny that these men and women become Fae, that they might one day join you. Sometimes we are led to our destinies, as your mother and her companions were. Other times, destiny is brought to them."

Jak raised the Pillar of Eternity in one hand, staring at its length. "I did this?" she surveyed Yewin and the others. "You're saying that I was the source of their change all along?"

"The power is not of you, but of that which you carry. A Relic of the most powerful order."

"How is this possible?" said Jak.

"You were brought here, you were destined to change these people, just as your mother was destined to find the Annals of Adam before you were born."

"Who brought me here?"

"That is a far more complex question than you realize. There are forces at work beyond your control."

Jak frowned. "I do not want to be a pawn of some greater power."

"All the good that we do is part of a greater power."

Jak opened her mouth but had nothing to say in response to that. And she wasn't here to argue philosophy anyway.

"I told you she wouldn't like that. You've seen how she tries to take matters into her own hands." This time it was the second voice that spoke. The one named Harglim.

"We all have a destiny to play," said the other. "Not liking it does little to change that."

"So you're saying that my fate is set?" Jak asked. "I can't change anything of the future?"

"Not at all," said the voice of Perchel. "The future is not written yet. You always have the freedom to choose."

"But if that's true, then how is my destiny set in stone?"

"Destiny is not fate. You can choose to reject it."

"And if I do?"

There was silence, the air stood completely still. Jak kept the Pillar of Eternity active, the scene of Yewin's transformation still playing out

in slow motion.

She was about to ask again, when the voice of Perchel came again.  
“There is yet another test.”

The words brought with them a surge of power that surrounded Jak, bathing out the area around her in a burst of light. She covered her eyes as whiteness surrounded her.

When she next opened her eyes, she was standing somewhere

new. The Pillar of Eternity was no longer in her hand, disappeared as it had the first time. She took a moment to survey her surroundings. She didn't recognize anything about the place. Where the northern village had been partially familiar to her, apart from the overabundance of trees, this place was completely different.

Enormous golden hills stretched out in all directions, coming right up to where she stood. She stared down at her feet where they met the strange substance. Wait, it wasn't strange at all. It was sand, like what she saw on the beach. But this was different. There was so much of it here. And no ocean in sight.

A bead of sweat ran down her forehead. It was hot here too. The sun radiated overhead, making her skin feel like she had just been tossed into a frying pan. This was not a pleasant place to be at all. She hadn't even thought such a place existed. Where were the mountains, the grasslands, or the clouds for that matter?

She turned on the spot, looking for a sign of anything familiar, when she caught sight of some shapes nearby. From this distance, she couldn't make out what they were, but it was the only object around that wasn't sand.

She began walking, slipping in the sand as she went, and feeling the heat rise through her traveling boots. She would need to find some kind of shade if she didn't want to burn alive. Hopefully her new Toughness brand would keep that from happening any time soon.

As she approached, the object became clearer. It looked to be some kind of tent, though larger than those she was familiar with. This one could easily house four or five of the personal tents she was used to. It spread out along the sand, anchored with large cords and stakes that must have penetrated deep into the earth.

The land was slightly different here. There was rock ahead, and Jak could feel the earth becoming firmer beneath her feet.

She nearly took a step back when she spotted two strange animals standing beside the tent. They were taller than a horse, and had two

enormous humps. What on Earth were those? She had never seen anything like them before. Even their faces were completely foreign to her. She didn't even know how to describe them. They didn't look like any other animal she had ever seen up close.

Despite their strange appearance, a few things were beginning to fall into place. Gabriel had talked about animals such as these, though Jak had imagined them more like horses. And she had also heard of lands scorched by the sun, and possessing little plant or animal life, in the southern kingdoms. Was that where she was now?

But despite the strange animals, she found herself distracted by the next thing she laid her eyes on. There were plants here, some of them strange, but still carrying the familiar green. There must be water nearby.

Sure enough, as she drew even closer, she caught sight of a small lake nearby. If she hadn't seen the tent first, she might never have seen it over the rise of the sand dunes. But now that she was here, she couldn't believe she hadn't seen it earlier. What little plant life there was surrounded the small lake contrasted starkly with the golden dunes framing it.

Jak hadn't felt the urge to drink yet, but she was sweating freely already, and even with her Hungerless brand, she would need to fill up eventually. A good thing she had arrived where she did.

That thought brought her back to the reason she was here. Obviously there was something that these invisible people wanted her to see, or to do. Well then, seeing as there was no one else in the area, she supposed checking the tent would be her first option.

She made her way even closer, glancing down at the ground as she did so.

A sound like a crack of thunder split the air, accompanied by a harsh cry, a human cry.

Jak looked up and saw something on the other side of the tent. There was a person there, dressed in white, though she couldn't quite see what was happening from this angle. But whatever it was, it didn't sound good.

The sound echoed across the dunes, once again accompanied by the outcry. Someone was in trouble.

She nearly slipped on the sand as she struggled to move faster. Then hard rock was underneath her feet and she ran around the tent to see what was going on.

A tall man, clothed all in white, towered over another. The second man knelt in a fetal position on the ground. He had no clothes on his back, and his skin was a dark color, something Jak had only seen once or twice in Skyecliff. Only the merchants from the southern kingdoms had skin that color.

The man in white raised a hand, and Jak saw a whip uncoil then come hurtling down and striking the back of the other. The man cried out, and the whip left a large, red welt where it hit, one of many.

Jak felt the blood drain from her face. What was the man doing to that other man? He wasn't a demon, so why would he do such a thing?

"Stop!" she yelled.

Instantly the man in white whipped his head around to see who had shouted. His face was covered in a white scarf, but his exposed eyes narrowed upon seeing her.

He shouted something at her in a language she did not understand. But he didn't sound friendly. He reached for something at his waist, a short sword by the look of it.

She put out her hands. "I'm not here to harm you," she said. "Why are you hurting that man?"

The man in white paused. But after a moment, he shouted something else at her, still using words she didn't recognize.

"I can't understand you," she said, but pointed at herself. "I'm Jak. I'm from a kingdom to the north of here, I think. Do you understand me?"

The man on the ground looked up from his fetal position. He was breathing heavily, obviously in a lot of pain, but there was something else in his eyes that Jak recognized. Hope.

The man in white did not seem pleased with her arrival. He continued to shout at her, taking several aggressive steps forward and reaching again for the sword on his belt.

Jak reached for her own weapon before realizing that she did not have any. Her spear and the Pillar of Eternity had been taken from her somehow, probably as part of the test.

But that did not leave her defenseless.

She activated her Telekinesis brand. She watched with some satisfaction as the man in white stopped in his tracks, staring at the light streaming out of her forehead. Then she reached forth one hand and took hold of the man with her mind.

He began yelling as his body was yanked into the air by some invisible force. He pushed against her barrier, but his strength was nothing she couldn't handle. She tightened her hold on him, and he squealed as the invisible barrier closed in. The other man, who had been whipped, began to get to his feet, stumbling at first but staring in fascination at his oppressor.

"I can't speak your language," said Jak, coming closer and facing the man in white. His struggling died down and he met her eyes. There was fear there, and anger. "But I'm going to put you down now. Do not try to attack me again."

She knew he couldn't understand her, but hopefully her actions would speak louder than words. Using her Telekinetic abilities, she gently placed him back down on the ground.

When she let her brand deactivate, he lay there, staring up at her. He said nothing, speechless for some time.

"Now then," she said. "Perhaps we can start over and come to..."

With a snarl, he lunged for his sword again, picked it up, and hurled it at Jak before she had time to react. Just in time, she threw up a Telekinetic barrier to stop the sword from coming in contact with her head. It bounced off her barrier and fell to the stony ground with a clatter.

Before he could scramble for his fallen weapon, Jak wrapped him up in another cocoon of Telekinetic energy. "That was not a good plan," she said, annoyed. "Let me reiterate."

But just as she was pondering what to do with the man, his eyes widened and he gasped, or more like choked. A red patch began to stain the front of the man's white clothing.

The dark man, previously the victim, stood behind the man in white with a dagger in hand. It was embedded to the hilt in his oppressor's back.

Jak let her magic die, and the man in white collapsed to the ground, his eyes already staring sightlessly at the sky.

Jak prepared her magic again, getting ready to restrain the other man as well. Why had he done that? Well, that wasn't exactly a mystery. The man in white had beaten him after all. But Jak wasn't sure that made it better.

"He would not have listened to you," said the man, splaying his hands so she could see he held no other weapons.

"You speak my language?" Jak kept her magic at bay for now, letting the man talk.

He nodded, "My previous master was a merchant. We made several trips to your country."

Jak frowned, "Your master? What do you mean by that?"

The man frowned back at her. "Is it not obvious? I am a slave."

"A slave? You mean this man forces you to work?"

The man looked down at his dead master, "This one was worse than most. I was the latest among many slaves. Most of the others died in his fits of anger. He would have done the same to me and you if given the chance. So I made sure he did not get that chance."

"But slavery is horrible. Someone should put a stop to it. Don't you have a queen or king to keep that from happening?"

He cocked his head at her. "You know nothing of our ways, do you? How did you come here?"

"It's a long story," said Jak.

"I will believe it." He pointed at the corpse of his former master. "He was wrong to attack you, I am sorry his death was necessary. He clearly did not recognize your gifts for what they are."

"Brands are not common here?"

"Some have them, those among the very wealthy with strong trade ties to your land."

Jak nodded, "I was happy to help, though I wish he did not have to die."

"If you had not interrupted, he might have killed me. I am not sorry."

"Why was he beating you like that?" Jak asked.

"I was late in bringing him water. Because of how long it took to feed the camels," he waved a hand at the strange creatures Jak had noticed earlier. So that's what they were called.

"That seems like an odd reason to punish a person." Jak remarked.

The man shook his head. "Not for him. I should have known better than to delay."

"So what will you do now?"

"I must run. He has companions who will return soon, and once they learn that a slave has killed his master, I will be hunted until they find and execute me."

Jak felt her heart sink. Were these people really that cruel? Slavery aside, beating someone to death certainly deserved some kind of retaliation. Jak would not blame the slave for reacting the way he did. But perhaps that was wishful thinking. What bothered her more was the idea that there were worse things in the world than the prejudice of Queen Telma and others. Slavery hadn't even occurred to her as a thing that people would do. Perhaps there was a lesson to be learned here.

"My name is Mosaial," he said, with a slight bow.

"I'm Jak," she said, with a slight nod of her head. "I'm glad I could help you, but I'm sorry that you will need to run. Perhaps you could join us in the north."

"I understand we are not often treated well in your country. Only merchants are permitted, and then only a select few."

"I and the others that follow me are somewhat of a special circumstance," Jak admitted. "We're not associated with the central government."

"Then I will follow you there," he said, with hope in his eyes.

"Oh," Jak hesitated. "I'm not sure it will be that simple. I didn't exactly come here by conventional means. You will probably have to find me."

"The trial is over," said a voice behind her. It was Perchel. The bright sunlight began to grow brighter.

Jak's eyes widened and she hastened her speech. "Mosaial. You'll find us in the mountains to the north. There is a path that leads through them, near their center, where you'll find a large valley. If you want sanctuary, you'll find it..."

But her last comment was cut off as the world went white again.



**T**his time she was not transported to another land, but she was

back in that strange, white corridor.

“What was that?” she asked aloud, knowing that Perchel and Harglim were listening.

“The test is over,” said Perchel’s voice.

“What test? I didn’t really do anything?”

“You saved that man’s life.”

“I distracted the man who was beating him. He saved his own life.”

“Often our destiny is not that of a battering ram, but of a sculptor’s chisel, removing one small piece at a time, yet culminating in a magnificent work.”

“I don’t understand what that has to do with...”

“It was your destiny to interfere with the injustices rained down on that man. Just as it was his destiny to take his fate into his own hands.”

“So you’re saying I followed destiny by stopping his oppressor? But of course I would stop that, he was beating the man.”

“Yet you still had a choice. You could have left them alone, could have gone on your own way.”

“I wouldn’t do that, how could I?”

“Indeed, and such is your destiny.”

Jak thought that through. “I think I understand. This was a lesson about destiny. You’re saying I still had a choice, but I chose to take the path I was meant to take. Something or someone put me there to save that man’s life, and even though I could have chosen otherwise, whatever put me there knew I would follow through.”

“That is correct.”

“So how is that different from forcing my destiny, if it was known beforehand what I would do.”

“Because you always had the freedom to choose otherwise. Many others, including him who came before you, choose to go against their destinies. That is why the Pillar of Eternity refused him.”

Jak frowned, staring aimlessly down the white corridor. “You

mentioned someone before. Who was he? Cain?"

"It is not our purpose to share such things. Suffice it to say, you have passed the first test."

And Jak knew no more.



WHEN SHE CAME BACK to her senses, she was on the mountainside again, lying on the ground next to a tall pine tree. She blinked, letting her eyes adjust to the light, and raised herself up onto her elbows.

Beside her lay Seph, Marek, and Karlona. All three of them were lying in a row, as if placed there. And all three did not move, though Jak noted with some relief that they still breathed. They were alive, and sound asleep.

On her other side lay her provisions, including her spear and the Pillar of Eternity, lying parallel to her and the others in a neat row. Well at least they still had the Pillar, though Jak could see no sign of another Pillar of Eternity. But the strange voices had told her she passed the first test. That implied that there were more. Well so be it. This first test hadn't really been much of a test, but more of a lesson, though from the sound of it, not everyone passed the test. Whoever had tried last had failed. But who was it?

She rose to her feet and took in the area around her. She didn't recognize it. If anything they were even further up the mountain than they had been when she fell unconscious. Had the others carried her here? And why were they asleep in broad daylight?

Jak listened closely for any sign of demons, but only the wind howled around her. Karlona stirred nearby, her green eyes fluttering open. It didn't take long before she rose to her feet, scanning the area around them.

"What happened?" she asked, staring around confused. "Did you carry me here?"

Jak shook her head. Both Seph and Marek began to stir as well, blinking and taking deep breaths.

"Last thing I remember, the Pillar of Eternity began acting strangely," said Karlona, taking an extra step or two towards Jak. "Then you tripped and I...well I don't remember anything after that. Are you hurt at all?"

Again, Jak shook her head. "No, but something did happen. It's a long story but I can tell you on the way."

"So you mean to keep going?" asked her mother.

"Of course she does," Marek stepped up beside the Shadow Elf. "We are only closer to our goal."

Jak frowned at Marek. "Did you see something while we were all out?" "I know we were carried here," Marek confirmed. "Though I do not know why, or by whom. A strange spell came over all of us, but I remember seeing faces before I lost consciousness. Did none of you see it?" He swiveled his head to look at all three of them. Seph and Karlona shook their heads.

"I don't like this, Jak." Karlona swung around to face her. "Anything that can get the drop on me is not something I trust."

"I am sure they mean us no harm," said Marek.

"Yes, then why don't they show themselves, whoever these people of yours are."

"Maybe we're supposed to make our way on our own," said Jak, softly, almost to herself.

Karlona met her daughter's pensive face. "Then why help us at all?"

"They gave us just enough of a push for us to fulfill our goals." Jak said, feeling a measure of confidence begin to take hold. She was beginning to have an idea of who these people were that deposited them further up the mountainside. "They're making up for their interference, the time spent talking to me."

Karlona paused, "You saw these people? I thought you were unconscious with the rest of us."

"I woke up in the same place, but I was not unconscious," said Jak. "Not in the way you were. And I didn't exactly see them. Again, it's a long story."

"I see no reason not to continue on," said Seph, checking his bag to make sure everything was still there. "We should stop to gather some edibles before we get high enough. Nothing lives up there, but it shouldn't take more than a day or so to reach the top. Less if we hurry. We can be back before our supplies wear out."

"Then let's do it," said Jak, feeling a sudden rush of energy. "The sooner we finish, the sooner we can find the Pillar of Eternity."

"Yes, and once we get back on the path you can tell us what happened from your perspective," said Karlona.

They spent the next hour gathering what they could. There were still some trees nearby, some of which had soft, edible bark. Seph also managed to shoot a few rabbits, stringing them up by their feet and strapping them to his pack, ready for cooking and eating later. Even Marek pitched in, collecting leaves and berries of the non-poisonous variety.

Eventually they were ready to set out again. Jak felt strangely refreshed since she had awoken, and the others expressed similar feelings. Yet while they travelled, she told them of the vision she'd received while they were unconscious. She told them of her first

vision of Karlona, and the turning of the Shadow Elves. That quickly got her mother's attention, and she asked a few pointed questions to clarify what Jak saw.

"Yes, that pretty much describes what happened. The leader you spoke of was Amaram. He led our expedition until he died, killed by a Watcher on the same day that I gave you to your father."

"I thought something like that must have been the case, because I didn't recognize him," Jak replied.

"So you're saying this was just a vision?" said Marek. "You couldn't interact?"

"Well, not yet, but after that I was transported somewhere else."

And she proceeded to talk about her encounter with Yewin and the others in the north, about how she and the Pillar of Eternity were somehow responsible for their change. She also told them of the odd encounter with the slave in the southern kingdoms, Mosaial.

"Ultimately I think the whole thing was meant to teach me a lesson," she concluded. "That we all have a destiny, chosen by some divine power or something, that wasn't exactly clear. But not everyone fulfills it, because we still have a choice. In this case, I was placed in the north, and by that slave, to shape him into something he would eventually become. I guess that was part of my destiny."

"What troubles me is how you were somehow able to jump backward in time," said Seph. "No one has ever been able to do something like that before, even in vision."

"What about the prophecies in your book?" Jak asked. "Aren't they looking ahead to the future?"

"The prophecies aren't set in stone, they're more like probabilities laid out by those with more foreknowledge than we have. Granted, they are very strong possibilities, reaching a level of prediction that we cannot understand, but they are not visions of the future. The future has yet to be written. And they can go wrong."

"How do you know that?" said Jak, blinking at Seph. He hadn't said much on this topic before, but it sounded a lot like what those mysterious voices had said.

Seph glanced at the others. "I learned it in my travels. Certain experiences."

Jak nodded and did not probe further. By 'certain experiences' he meant his vision of that woman, whoever she was. But what he said sounded similar to what she had learned from her own visions. Prophecy, like destiny, could be broken. What would happen if everyone fulfilled their destiny? Would the world somehow be a perfect place? Or was destiny also flawed, just like people were? How was she to trust this "Guiding Hand" the voices had spoken of, or whatever it was that crafted her destiny?

That thought nagged at her throughout the rest of the day as they continued scaling the mountain. They actually made pretty good time at first. While there were no more man-made paths this far up, at least none that were traveled enough to see, they still managed to find an easy route up the side of the mountain, occasionally traveling sideways in order to find a better route up.

The others continued to ask her questions about what she'd seen, but eventually all of them began to stay silent as the climb increased in its challenge.

Years ago, she would have thought of the growling hike as a nuisance, but now, thanks to her brands, she managed to do alright. But that could not be said for the others. They had to stop several times for rests, and it was all Jak could do not to keep pressing on herself.

At one such stop, she drifted back a few paces to stare in the direction they had come, looking for any sign of demons. Just then, her mother stepped up beside her, nearly causing Jak to jump. The Shadow Elves could move with astonishing silence.

"You must be tired, after using the Pillar and then going through whatever test that was," Karlona said, looking her daughter up and down with concern.

Jak shrugged. "I'll be alright. We can rest once we've lost the demons."

Yes, she was tired, but she still had the Strength and Sleeplessness brands to help her out. Though her past use of the Pillar of Eternity had drained her of energy, and that was beginning to take its toll. If they pushed hard for the rest of the day, as they would probably need to, she might even have to sleep tonight.

Jak almost chuckled at how inconvenient that seemed to her. Just a few weeks ago, she would have gawked at the idea of not getting sleep every night. Now, thanks to her Sleeplessness brand, it was common not to sleep for one or two weeks straight. Now, all that sleep seemed like such a waste of time.

"So, tell me about Seph," Karlona said, suddenly.

Jak turned slightly to see her mother. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, don't fool with me." Her mother bore a slight smile. "I saw the way you two were looking at each other back at the camp. And the way you reacted when he decided to go behind your back to join us..."

Her face heated slightly. "Well, we might have something going on."

"Something good, I hope."

Jak thought it through. "Yes, it's good." Then her smile widened unintentionally.

“Very good it seems,” Karlona said, noting her smile. “Well, I’m happy for you. He’s a good man, if not a bit different from what I might have expected for you.”

“And what would you expect for me?” Jak said, curious.

“Well...I don’t know, to be honest,” said Karlona with a slight laugh. “I guess I just expected someone like your father was for me, but younger of course. Like Naem before...well before everything happened with him.”

“Right,” Jak shrugged and peeked over her shoulder to see what Seph and Marek were doing. They were far enough away that they probably weren’t listening. At least she hoped not. “Do we have to talk about this right now?”

Her mother continued as if she hadn’t heard. “And you’re still young, you have time to figure things out for yourself, and make sure you have the right guy before...”

“Okay, next topic, mother.” Jak said, a bit more insistently.

Karlona smiled, but to Jak’s relief, she didn’t say anything more about Seph.

“I’m proud of what you’ve become,” said Karlona after a while. “I think your father would be too.”

Something welled up inside of Jak. A good something, but she wasn’t sure how to put it into words. “Thank you,” was all that came out. “If you would have told me a year ago about all the things I can do now...”

“It’s not just your abilities, Jak. I’ve watched you interact with us, the other Fae, and the humans that follow you. You care for them, Jak. That’s more than a lot of people can say.”

Jak stared at the ground. “That was father’s influence I think. He was seclusive but if anyone ever needed him...”

“I know,” said Karlona. “That’s why I married him.”

A reminiscent smile spread over her dark face, her green eyes staring into empty space.

“We’re ready to keep going,” a tired-looking Seph shouted at them from behind.

Jak acknowledged him and exchanged a nod with her mother. She liked talking to Karlona about her father. They would have to resume this conversation later.

They continued on after that, but stopped far more often than Jak liked. Every time, she was reminded of the demons in pursuit. While they seemed to have lost them when she had her vision, and they were all miraculously transported partially up the mountain, she was sure they would catch up eventually.

Demons could climb a mountain fast, far faster than a human. They never tired, and with someone like Cain pressing them on, they

could go for days without stopping. She had learned that long before, when some demons had carried her up a mountain, never stopping for food, drink, or rest.

They would find them eventually. Cain would find them eventually. Their only course of action was to get to the top and find that Pillar of Eternity before he could.

Once night came, they continued in the dark, with Karlona

leading them, for some time. But eventually Seph and Marek began to fall behind. As much as Jak hated to admit it, they needed to stop for the night, and allow her comrades to get some sleep. Even Karlona's eyelids were beginning to droop.

They came to a minor plateau, perched next to a cliff wall that appeared to be their only way up. They definitely weren't going to have any luck scaling that tonight, and Jak was too tired to use her Telekinesis to lift everyone up.

"Let's stop here," said Jak. "We can continue in the morning."

Grateful for the chance to stop and rest, Seph and Marek unloaded their packs off their backs, and began to set up their small camp. Jak began by clearing away the snow in the immediate area by brandishing her Flamedancer brand. She spewed hot jets of flame all around them, watching as the snow quickly melted to liquid, then rose as steam. At least they could have a dry campsite.

Unfortunately, there was one small problem. They were high enough now, that there were few trees or other sources of wood. Seph had some tinder stowed away, but they didn't have enough to keep the fire going for long. There was nothing around them but rock and snow. Eventually, they managed to backtrack and gather what they could, but it would only be enough to last for an hour or two. And they wouldn't find any more wood ahead. That meant they would have to either find the Pillar of Eternity in the next day and return, or they would be left stranded with nothing to keep them warm or cook their food.

They ate mostly in silence, partly because no one had anything to say, but also partly because they were all thinking about the demon threat. Or at least, that's what Jak was thinking about. She didn't know what troubled the others. Seph and Karlona both had lines in their foreheads, clearly worried about something. Only Marek seemed perfectly at ease with their situation. He roasted one of Seph's rabbits on a stick, then eagerly bit into it once it was done.



“I’ll take the watch,” said Jak, once they were nearly finished eating.

No one argued with her on this. She was the only one with Sleeplessness, and her new Sightseer brand made her ideal for a nightwatch, though Karlona could give even her a run for her money when it came to seeing in the dark.

But after her earlier vision, and waking up on the side of the mountain, she did feel tired. She would need an hour or so at least. Perhaps she could wake Karlona after a few hours and let her take the watch instead. But for now, she could stay up all night and give the others some much-needed rest.

She kept the fire going as long as she could, and even left for a time to find some nearby brush to keep it burning just a little longer. But it didn’t take long for the flames to die completely.

She shivered in the cold, hugging her knees to her body. Despite not needing sleep, she could admit that having to wait for the others to wake was a definite drawback. Right now it was just her and her thoughts.

After a while, she heard something. But it wasn’t coming from below them, it was coming from right next to her. Seph was shivering under his blanket. His breath came in sharp intakes and came out again in puffs of misty air that stood out starkly in the light of the moon.

She inched herself a little closer, picking up a stone that they had used to frame the fire. “You still glad you came?” she said, passing the stone to Seph, who accepted it gratefully. It had lost most of the heat from the fire, but it was still warmer than the rest of their environment.

Seph buried the stone under his blankets, and sighed in mild relief. “I told you, Jak, something makes me think that I needed to be on this one with you.”

“Did your mysterious lady in white tell you that?”

“No,” he breathed out. “Sometimes I get ideas though, thoughts that eventually lead somewhere. It’s how I met you that day in the library.”

Jak smiled, thinking back to that day. She had fallen asleep in the library, only to wake up to see Seph taking a peek at what she had been reading. Those were simpler days.

Seph continued to shiver, to the point that it began to worry Jak. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll...be fine.” he said through clenched teeth. “Might not get a solid night’s sleep though.”

“Well, I told you that there would be problems if you came.”

He grinned at her, despite his discomfort. “Going to tell me you

told me so?"

"I did tell you so, but that doesn't matter. I'm actually kind of glad you're here," she winked, "if only for selfish reasons."

"I'll take that," he said, adjusting his body to a more comfortable position.

"I know what you've said before, but I still think you should get a brand or two," said Jak.

"I appreciate the thought, I really do, but I'll be fine." His statement was undermined by an involuntary shiver.

Frowning, she drew a little closer, reaching out a hand to touch his face. It was freezing. He was going to need something more than a warm rock.

"Give me your canteen," she told him.

He hesitated, and Jak couldn't quite make out his expression in the dark. But a moment later he reached in his sack for the animal skin canteen and handed it to her.

She grabbed it and opened the top, sticking a finger inside till it touched the water.

"Hey now," said Seph as she dipped her hand into his drinking water.

"Hush," she said, concentrating. Her Flamedancer brand flared briefly to life as she imbued the water with enough heat to bring it just short of a boil. Steam rushed out of the canteen, and Jak handed it back to Seph. "Drink what you can. The heat should help warm you from the inside." She also retrieved his rock, reheated it with a bit of magic, and returned it to him.

Seph accepted the rock, and the canteen. A pleasing shiver ran up his spine as he took a long gulp, "Oh, that feels good. Thank you." He took another gulp and then brought the warm container and rock back under the covers to keep its heat from escaping.

"You're welcome," said Jak. Next, she took her own blankets off her shoulders and placed them on Seph. She wasn't immune to cold, but she could deal with it for now. Seph needed it more.

"I should try and count the number of times I would be dead without you," he said. His voice was growing weary, lowering in volume. "I'll bet it's...a lot."

Jak knew most of those occasions had been saving him from a mess she had created in the first place. But she didn't bother to mention that.

She watched him under his covers, no longer quivering like before. The tendrils of his hair waved slightly in the nighttime breeze, and his eyes closed. He seemed content, far more content than she felt, even though she didn't have to deal with the elements in the same way that he did. She wished she could borrow that from him, his confidence,

his assuredness that everything would work out.

For a moment, she considered climbing under the covers next to him. It would keep them both warm, and perhaps she would find a measure of comfort in lying next to him, feeling his breathing.

But Seph was already asleep, his chest rising and falling under the blankets. He would be fine now that he had the warm water and extra blanket. She would leave him be.

Instead, she went back to hugging her knees to her chest, doing her best to conserve every ounce of heat she possessed. But in the end, she had to get up and walk around, lighting a small flame in her hand, which she kept close to her chest. Keeping a sustained flame alight like that would take its toll on her strength eventually, but she could handle it with the help of all her other brands.

She walked in circles for a while, finally taking a moment to retreat back down the mountain and look for more wood to use. If they needed to build another fire later, they would need to carry something with them.

She tried circling down and around towards an area they hadn't passed through on their way up. Sure enough, a small pine tree clung to life not far away, protected from the elements by a small cliff face.

She used her Telekinetic abilities to wrench the entire thing out of the ground before snapping its individual branches and trunk into pieces.

The wind whipped around her, her hair flying into her face as she worked. When she was done, she did what she could to bundle it all together and began lifting it back to camp using Telekinesis.

A foul stench reached her nostrils. A smell of something dying.

The wood fell to the ground as she immediately recognized the smell. It could just be a dying creature, its decomposing odor carried on the wind. But there was another option that, given the circumstances, seemed far more likely.

Demons were nearby.

Forgetting all about the wood, she raced back to the camp. How had she been so stupid? She couldn't leave the others when there were demons about, even if she hadn't heard anything. There were no howls, no signs of any impending danger, but if that smell was what she thought it was...

She sprinted the rest of the distance, finally coming back to the path. Their camp was just ahead, further up the mountain. But she couldn't yet see well enough to know if her companions were safe.

As she ran, something caught her eye beneath her in the moonlight, and she slowed to get a good look. Their footprints in the snow, left earlier that day, were completely gone. They were replaced with multiple tracks, barefoot human tracks, with claws. Demon

tracks.

No, no, no! If they were dead and it was her fault, she would never forgive herself. How had the demons gotten past her without her realizing it. Demons were loud, and she hadn't been far. She could have easily heard a demon at this range. Sometimes you could hear them from miles away.

Unless these demons were being specifically directed by Cain to be silent.

Redoubling her pace, she threw herself up the hill, coming to rest just at the crest. "Seph!" she cried. "Mother. Are you there?"

Karlona, Seph, and Marek were all rising out of their blankets, confusion and alarm evident in the way they stumbled around, trying simultaneously to reach for weapons and rise to their feet.

But they were alive.

Jak gasped in relief, running the rest of the way.

"What is it?" said her mother. "Demons?"

"I thought so," said Jak coming to rest near them and resisting the urge to throw her arms around Seph. If he had died... "I thought I smelled them, and there were tracks."

Karlona's eyes immediately fell to the ground, scanning the area around them. She gasped and put one hand to her mouth. "There are tracks. Look."

Jak lit a flame in one hand so they could all see better. Sure enough, demon tracks were all around them, but they made a circle around the camp, as if specifically avoided them. Why hadn't they attacked? They had been helpless, easy prey.

Unless.

Jak's eyes snapped upward to view the cliff face ahead of them. Just as she did so, she caught sight of something hauling itself up and over the rock wall.

Without pausing to speak, she ran to the side of the cliff and jumped. In mid-air, she activated her Telekinetic brand, and propelled herself upward until she reached the top. She landed, crouched and staring straight ahead of her. From up here, she could easily see the tip of the mountain. There was still a lot of progress to be made, but as far as she could tell, there were no more cliffs or significant obstacles in their path, just a narrow ridge leading forward, with a sharp drop on both sides. Somewhere ahead of her, lay the second Pillar of Eternity.

And the demons were going to get there first.

She could see them now, not far in the distance, running on all fours. They were making a beeline for the top of the mountain, paying little attention to their own safety. One even slipped on the snow, sliding down a long slope on one side, struggling to recover its

footing, but eventually falling off the edge and tumbling to its death.

They weren't trying to attack them. They were trying to get to the Pillar of Eternity before Jak and her company did. This was Cain's doing. He knew that the demons alone were no match for her, not without a healthy amount of luck. So he was choosing instead to lead the demons away, to recover his prize before she could get her hands on it.

She scanned the area, around and below. If the Pillar was so important to Cain why wasn't he here to take it himself? Was he on his way now, and sent his demons ahead to get the job done before he could get there?

"Break camp," she yelled down to the others. "We need to move now!"

Her companions did not hesitate to obey. They didn't have much to move, so they were ready to go within seconds. The sky was beginning to brighten in the east, which was much more visible from up here. Already they must have climbed higher than most of their surrounding mountains. She could see for miles in every direction. But there was only one direction that she cared about.

One by one, she levitated Seph, Marek, and Karlona into the air, carrying them up the cliff face with her Telekinetic brand.

Once they were all up, they set out once again. But it was too late. They couldn't move at the rate the demons maintained, not without risking a deathly fall off the ridge. But what more could they do? She couldn't use the Pillar to get to them any faster. Doing so would wear her out, and she would leave the others stranded.

They could only hope that once the demons reached the top of the mountain, that they would be unable to retrieve the Pillar of Eternity until they could get there.

They spent the majority of the day continuing along the ridge.

But progress was slow. Every once in a while the path became so narrow that they had to cling to the rock face to keep from falling. In some areas, Jak had to melt away the ice to make it safe to climb.

And all the while an icy wind beat at them, howling around the mountain. Or were those demons howls?

“Jak,” said Seph from behind her. She turned to see him with his hands stuck under his armpits, and his face pale. They had brought extra clothing, but none of them were fully equipped with winter wear. It was beginning to take a toll. “I think you should go on ahead. You can move much faster with your brands.”

“No,” said Jak immediately, raising her voice to be heard over the wind that whipped at her hair. “The rest of you might lose your footing and I wouldn’t be here to keep you from falling.”

“We can stay put, wait for you to return.”

Jak shook her head. “I’m not leaving you, and that’s that.”

“And I’m not leaving her,” said Karlona. “We have no idea what is waiting for us up there, and I’m not letting her walk into it alone.”

“And I’m the only one who knows the way,” added Marek. “We need to stick together.”

“Don’t we all know the way by now?” said Seph. “It’s up.”

“The path to get there is not always intuitive, but I know the way. That is one advantage we have over the demons.”

Jak pressed her lips together. She was glad they had that advantage, but she didn’t understand it. Marek was still a bit of an oddity. He clearly had Marek’s memories, but something had definitely changed about him. He was more like Seph, with talk about spiritual journeys and such. But so far his guidance had led them in the right direction, finding the easiest way to scale the mountain. Or at least she assumed it was the easiest. It certainly wasn’t easy.

“We stick together,” she said with finality. Seph nodded, and went back to staring at the ground again, taking one shaky step after another.

Jak couldn't blame him. She was starting to feel the effects of the weather as well. It was exhausting work, continuing to climb through the snow and rock with nothing but each other and the freezing wind to keep them company. And with the demons ahead of them, they were pushing themselves harder than ever before. If she was starting to feel fatigued, she could only imagine what the others were feeling.

Something fluttered around the corner of her vision. Her eyes shot in that direction and thought she saw something with white wings fly around the nearest rock. Probably just a bird of prey of some kind. Though she wasn't aware of any birds of prey with white wings. Maybe it was just a chunk of snow kicked up by the wind. She put it out of her mind.

Some time later, Karlona tensed. "Did you see something?" she said, pointing ahead of them. They were approaching a small outcrop of rock that they would probably have to scale, which meant Jak would need to use her Telekinetic abilities.

"What did you see?" she asked her mother. They stopped walking, and both Marek and Seph stopped behind them. The latter was continuing to rub some life into his fingers.

"Something like a large bird, but different," said Karlona. "It disappeared ahead of us."

"I saw something like that too, earlier. What do you mean 'different'?"

"It's hard to say at this distance," Karlona admitted. "But I could have sworn it had a face."

That was something Jak hadn't expected to hear. "Like a human face?" she asked.

"Yes, exactly. I'm sure I imagined that though."

"You did not imagine it," said a soft voice.

Jak was so startled that she nearly fell backwards, sending her and everyone behind her tumbling down the mountain. She swayed but managed to keep her footing. Karlona had her daggers out.

Floating to their right was a person. But not a normal human being. He was smaller, about the size of Girwirt and the gnomes, and he had on a loose tunic of white cloth, tied together with a brown strip, and his hair was a bright blonde color. If he had stood next to Jak, he would have barely come up to her thighs. But he wasn't standing. He was flying with two great, beating wings that extended out of his back.

"You have no need to fear me," he said. Jak recognized that voice.

"You're Perchel," she said. "You were there with me in the vision."

The small person smiled and gave a small bow in midair. "At your service."

"I had no idea you were..." she trailed off. What exactly was

Perchel?

"I believe you would call us Sky Fae," said Perchel. "We have lived in these mountains for a long time."

"Of course you're Fae," she exclaimed, her face brightening. Everything was starting to make sense.

"We don't have much time. The enemy has forced our hand. We need to get you to your second test."

So she was right. There was another test coming. Jak glanced around at her companions, all of whom were gazing at the small Fae in awe. They'd seen Fae before, hadn't they? This variety wasn't any stranger. Though she had to admit there was something mesmerizing about the way Perchel's wings beat, keeping him hanging in the air.

"By enemy, you mean the demons?" asked Karlona. "We've been pursuing them, they passed us in the night."

"Yes, we did not anticipate this," said the little man. "While there is an appointed process to claiming the item you seek, we fear that their leader is capable of taking it himself if he wants to."

Jak nodded. "Cain is powerful."

"Then come. We will take you to our Aerie. Your companions can find shelter and warmth there."

As if on cue, seven more of the Sky Fae hovered into their vision. Before anyone could protest they laid hold on all four of them, two per person, and lifted them into the air.

Jak's stomach lurched as she watched the ground shrink beneath her. She had flown before, with the use of her Telekinetic brand, but it was another thing entirely to be carried like this.

"Oh Relics!" said a voice behind Jak. To her surprise, it wasn't Seph or Karlona, but Marek who voiced his discomfort. "They're going to drop us!"

"We will not drop you," shouted another Sky Fae through the roar of the wind. "Our wings are capable of handling far more weight than you will ever be."

Jak wasn't sure how that was possible. Their wings were large, yes, but they barely seemed strong enough to hold up their own bodies, much less others. Still, as with all the Fae, there was magic at work here.

They soared ahead, moving at a pace they could never have managed on foot. Jak squinted to see if she could find the demons. Yes, they were still there, traveling at a run up the slope of the mountain. They had already gained such a distance that Jak would not have been able to see them without the aid of her Sightseer brand. Still, those dark specks on the snow were growing larger. They were catching up.

But rather than head directly for the demons, the Sky Fae rose



upward, heading for a secondary peak that they would have passed eventually had they proceeded on foot. While it was still nearer their goal, it was still out of the way from a direct path to the top of Mt. Knot.

“Where are you taking us?” Jak said. “Shouldn’t we intercept the demons and keep them from getting to the top?”

“He who guides them will only send more,” said Perchel, as he carried her by the right arm. “And he is not far away now. Your second test is more of a priority.”

“What is this second test, anyway? Is it anything like the first?”

“Similar, yet different. You will find out soon.”

“And why is it so important that you came to get us.”

“We do not usually interfere in such things, it’s true. Had all gone to plan, you would have continued the second test when you reached the top, and you would never have seen us. We would have been your guides through the tests, nothing more.”

“How does that work, anyway? You were in my last test, but you also weren’t.”

“It is...difficult to explain. We were there, and also here. We are, shall we say, guardians of a sort. Our job is to protect that which you seek.”

“The Pillar of Eternity.”

“Precisely. We believe in you Jak. But the Relic requires that you be tested.”

Jak quieted as they neared the secondary peak. As they approached, she could make out a large rock that jutted outward, with what looked like stone structures of some kind, which led into the peak itself, like they were carved straight out of the rock. She could also see more Sky Fae, gathered at the lip of the stone outcropping. Some flew into the air at their approach, flocking closer to get a good look at them. There were dozens of them, perhaps a hundred. At least as many as the gnomes and dwarves who fled out of Mt. Harafast.

With a gentle grace, the Sky Fae deposited them on the edge of the rock. It was even colder up here, but the wind had died down, and Jak spotted shelter ahead. Those structures she had glimpsed earlier were domed houses made of layered rock. They were small, as could be expected for the size of the Sky Fae. But if they tried hard, they could probably get Seph or Marek inside one of them. With a little warmth it could be enough to keep them from freezing to death.

Curious faces of other Sky Fae, clothed in similar fashion to Perchel, regarded them as they arrived. “Come,” said Perchel. “We have a fire further in. You can rest yourselves and get something to eat.”

“I don’t need rest, or food right now,” said Jak.

Perchel inclined his head. "That is for the best. We must waste no time. If you will come with me."

Jak took one last glance at her mother and the others. Karlona gave her a brief nod. "I'll see to Seph and Marek," she said. "These people seem trustworthy enough. Go do what you have to do."

"Good luck," added Marek. "All depends on you."

Of course it did. Thanks to Marek for rubbing that in. Yet they were true words. Jak needed to pass this test, whatever it was. If she didn't, then the Pillar of Eternity would end up in the hands of Cain, and all would be lost. She had to get this right.

She followed Perchel further into their little sky kingdom. It truly was an amazing discovery. There was a whole city up here. The trappings were minimal, but who would have thought that such a thing existed undiscovered for so long. The side of the mountain towered over them as Perchel led her into an enormous cleft in the rock. The howl of the wind ceased completely, and the air stilled.

Jak almost laughed out loud. It was the first time that she had experienced this level of silence all day.

"There's the girl," said a voice ahead of them. Jak instantly recognized the voice as Harglim, the other guide from her first test. The Sky Fae himself looked more like a diminutive old man. His hair was white, and he had a beard that hung to his waist. His blue eyes twinkled at her in the dim light of the canyon. "We were very impressed by you last time. You showed true strength of character."

"All I did was do what anyone would have done."

"Ah, young one. If only everyone would have done what you did." The corners of his mouth sagged, but only for a moment. "Come, we are ready for you."

He led the way past the onlookers, and deeper through the canyon. Jak followed until the ground beneath her began to rise.

"We are nearly there," said Perchel, behind her. He was walking now, as was Harglim in front of her. Together they guided her forward.

Finally, Jak saw where they were headed. The canyon led to an altar of some kind, standing resolute straight ahead of them. Beyond that the canyon ended and she could see nothing but sky, and in the distance Jak could see the very top of Mt. Knot. What was left of their journey stood majestic in front of her, visible in all its glory from the altar.

"This is a sacred spot for us," said Perchel, coming around her and standing next to Harglim near the altar. "It is near enough to the ancient Relic that we are sometimes able to commune with it here."

"Commune with it?" Jak asked, cocking her head at them.

Perchel waved a hand at the Pillar of Eternity she already carried

strapped to her pack. "You have already recovered the companion of our Relic. Does it not speak to you?"

"It did, once." Jak confirmed. "But it hasn't in some time. Not since it first gifted me its magic."

"Well, these Relics are not simple tools. They were the master creations of our first ancestors. They represent everything your kind and mine are capable of achieving. Without them, we would not have much of what we now enjoy. This world, for example. Or branding. They are a part of all living things at some level."

"So how do I...commune with it?" Jak asked.

"The artifact would have reached out to you eventually, as you drew closer. But since we are short on time, we will probably need to help you relax. Perhaps if you would lie on the altar."

Jak hesitated. "You're not going to...sacrifice me or something."

"Oh no," said Harglim. "I'm sorry, I see why you would think that. No, we just need you comfortable. It will work better that way. If it makes you feel better, we will not fully render you unconscious. Just give you something to help your body relax."

"Okay, if you say so." Jak unslung her pack, placing the Pillar of Eternity gently on the ground, before hoisting herself up and onto the stone altar. She wasn't exactly sure how she could relax on such a hard surface, but she had Toughness so she didn't need to let it bother her.

"Drink this," Harglim handed her a shallow bowl with some liquid in it.

She drank a sip. The warm but bitter liquid trickled down her throat.

"Now give it a moment," said Perchel. "You'll begin to feel the effects soon enough."

Indeed, Jak could already see a number of odd colors swirling in her vision. The cleft seemed to close in on her, then retreat, like it was breathing. This was an odd sensation. It was a nice one too. She found the tension in her shoulders leaving her body, and she relaxed against the stone table, staring upward and smiling.

The colors continued dancing around her peripheral vision, growing closer and closer, merging with each other, until they overtook everything she could see and all went white.

**T**he light faded to night. Jak was on the side of a mountain, though not the one she had just left. She was surrounded by pine trees and a full moon provided what visibility she had. Did the mountain peaks look familiar? She couldn't quite tell in the night.

Well, wherever she was, she was here for some reason. The odd potion the Sky Fae had given her apparently worked. This could only be a vision from the second Pillar of Eternity. Her second test. Nothing for it but to push forward and face whatever challenges awaited.

The soft crunch of boots on snow caused her to look up and see a figure stepping down the mountain. The moonlight glinted off Watcher armor. He was a big man, probably golden haired from what she could tell. He used a spear to steady himself, while his other arm carried something wrapped in a lot of blankets.

Her eyes went wide, finally recognizing the man as he drew closer. This man was her father.

"I don't know what the boys are going to say about this. Watchers don't usually go into the mountains and come back with children." Her father was speaking to the thing he held in his arm.

And suddenly she knew what she was seeing. That bundle he held was her. This was the day that he brought her home from the mountains.

"I can't wait to show you the fortress, you're going to like it. When you're on the tower, you can see for miles. They even say you can see Tradehall on a clear day, though I think that's probably too far."

Why, why did the vision have to show her this? Her eyes burned as she watched her father come closer. He didn't appear to see her.

"Father?" she said as he drew within a few yards.

But he did not hear her either. This vision must be one of those where she was permitted to see and hear, but not to interact. Instead young Rael continued on past, resuming his chatter with the baby girl in his arms. Her.

"I know you're too young to understand this yet," he said. "But I want you to know how much I love your mother, how much I will

miss her, and how much I will love you.”

He was talking to the baby version of her, but the words could have been spoken to her directly. She blinked away a tear. Was this the reason why she had been brought here? To hear the loving words of her father, a man who had never displayed such emotion once she was older.

The scene rippled around Jak.

She was back in Riverbrook, staring straight at a young version of herself and Marek. They were playing by the river, both lying on their bellies near the edge of the bank, and splashing water at each other with their hands, all while the current roared by. Even though she knew this was the past, and that everything eventually turned out alright, she couldn't help but feel worried for the two children. They were awfully close to a potentially dangerous river.

Then Marek, in an effort to reach more water, fell in.

“Marek!” cried the younger version of herself, who scrambled to her feet. Yes, she remembered this all too clearly.

Marek was swept along with the rushing water. Jak followed her younger self down the bank, trotting to keep up with Marek as he went.

“Help!” yelled Marek. But there was nothing to be done.

“Marek!” young Jak cried, powerless to do anything.

At last, Marek grasped hold of a large log that hung over the side of the river, but he could not get a firm enough grip to pull himself out. “Help,” he yelled again. “I...I...” the young Jak pulled away slightly, knowing that in order to help, she would have to climb out on the log and pull him to safety. Jak remembered what she had been thinking. If she tried to help, she would likely fall in as well.

Crying and frantic, the younger version of herself turned and ran.

The scene rippled again.

Jak was back in her old home, clean and well cared for, not like the last time she had seen it with the roof caved in. The young Jak sat at the table, her eyes puffy and red. Her father sat on the other side, facing her. This vision was from the same day, though perhaps an hour or so later.

“You did the right thing, coming to get me,” he said. “If you had fallen in, we might have lost both of you.”

Her younger self said nothing, but began to cry again. Once again, Jak remembered. She hadn't run to get her father because she knew that he was better suited to help. She'd run because she was afraid.

“Marek is safe now, Jak. You can rest easy.” He reached one hand forward to touch young Jak's arm. The little girl rushed out of her chair and rounded the table to hug her father.

Even though she knew it was only a vision, Jak took a step

towards Rael. If only she could feel her father's embrace again. She raised her arms forward, reaching for him.

Ripple.

She was standing in the main square of Riverbrook. The sun was high in the sky, clouds drifted lazily above Jak, and all seemed relatively normal.

Except for the screams.

Jak turned to see demons running through the streets, most of them coming in a wave at one end of the town. Between her and them, a lone man stood resolute, facing down the oncoming threat.

That man was her father.

No, oh please no. "Don't show me this!" she pleaded with the forces that governed these visions, whether it was the Pillar of Eternity or the Sky Fae. "Please, not this, anything but this."

No one replied. Ahead of her, Rael strung arrow after arrow, sending the shafts flying at the onslaught of demons. One by one they fell. At least a dozen before the remainder grew too close to shoot.

Her father grabbed his Watcher spear from where it lay next to him. Raising it high above his head, he entered the battle.

As much as Jak wanted to turn away, she couldn't help but watch as her father rammed the spear into demon after demon. His Telekinetic brand shone on his left hand as he warded off some demons while killing others. Even after all that time living as a farmer, he still possessed the skills of a warrior. And that made him the only one who could defend the innocents of Riverbrook.

A dark form jumped onto his back from behind. Its teeth sank into Rael's neck, and he cried out.

Unbidden, the tears once again streamed down Jak's face. It had been hard enough to lose her father. Why did she now have to watch him die?

Just as her father fell to the ground bleeding, a cry went up around them. Watchers sprang from the side streets and rushed into the square. The demons lost interest in her father as these new warriors presented another source of blood for them to drain.

Carnage rained down around them, but Rael remained on his knees, still as a statue. But blood emanated from his neck, mixing with the pool of black blood that came from the demons he had slaughtered.

He collapsed.

Ripple.

Jak saw herself, cradling her father's head in her chest, ignoring the pool of blood she knelt in. It hadn't even been two years, but the girl she saw looked so much younger than how she felt now. A lot had changed since that fateful day.

Ripple.

“Do you wish you could change what happened?”

It was Perchel’s voice, once again emanating from somewhere behind her. She was back in that strange white corridor that led into nothingness. All was still around her.

“Of course I do,” she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. She wanted to be angry. Angry that she had to relive that horrifying moment. Angry that she could not have done anything to save him.

“And yet...” Perchel’s voice waited for something. She knew what she was supposed to say.

“Yes, I know that if he hadn’t died, I probably would never have become the person I am today. There are lives that I’ve saved, people who ultimately would not be alive if my father had lived. But that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t have him back if I could.”

“Indeed. Then you understand this lesson. Sometimes that which must happen requires sacrifice, it requires us to do things that we may not want or understand. Such was the case when your mother gave you to your father, when you abandoned your friend in order to find help, or when your father gave his life for you.”

“I didn’t abandon Marek because I knew it was the right thing to get help. I abandoned him because I was afraid and didn’t know what else to do.”

“But that doesn’t mean it was not the right thing to do.”

Jak closed her mouth. He was right. Even if she hadn’t been hysterical at the time, she would have probably gone to her father for help anyway. And perhaps at some level she had known that doing so was the right course of action. Because at the time, all she knew was that her father could help.

She raised a fist to wipe the last of her tears away. “Was that it? Is the test over?”

“That was the lesson. Now comes the test.”

Ripple.

The air hung around her, dripping with humidity and blanketing her almost instantly in a sheen of sweat. She took a deep breath, feeling the heavy air flow in and out of her lungs. She was in a forest, though it was nothing like the one she had seen in the north, during her vision of Yewin’s transformation. The trees here had massive leaves, and the trees made up only a small portion of the life that burst around her.

Plants of every conceivable variety stretched out in all directions, strange creatures moved from tree to tree, and everywhere she looked there was color, like flowers in shades she didn’t know existed naturally in the wild.

A low purring sound came from off to her right. When she turned

to see what it was, she nearly stumbled backward. The source of the noise was a giant cat, covered in dark spots and baring enormous fangs at her. Its whiskers quivered, its shoulders hunched, and a low growl escaped its throat. She raised her hands to brandish her spear, but realized too late that she had no weapon. None at all.

Before Jak could bring her magic to bear, it sprang at her with incredible speed. This time she did fall backward. Yet just as it stretched its paws at her, something else flew through the trees and impaled the creature right through the throat.

Jak breathed in and out heavily. She had never seen a creature like that.

But she recognized what had stopped it from killing her. The shaft of a spear pointed straight up, embedded in the giant cat's side. Jak turned to see who had thrown the weapon.

Several men, and a few women, stood not far away. They each had weapons raised, pointed not at the cat, but at her. Some had spears, but others had bows and slings. They were slightly darker in skin than Jak was used to seeing, though not as dark as the people of the southern kingdoms. In fact, from the way their eyes were shaped, they looked a lot like Seph.

One of them shouted at her. It was in another language she did not recognize. Though it was also different from the words spoken by the man in white during her last test. This one had more nasal tones to it.

She raised her hands high, making it clear that she had no weapon. "I can't speak your language. Can anyone speak mine?"

The group hesitated, glancing at each other. But most furrowed their brows, confused.

"I can speak," said a man who pushed his way to the front. He was shorter than the rest, but lean and muscular. He was clothed in simple trappings that covered everything from the waist down, but left most of his chest exposed, but for an array of trinkets that hung around his neck.

Jak silently thanked the ancestors and stood with her hands still raised. "I am not from around here. Are these the eastern nations?"

"That is what your kind calls us," said the young man, his brow furrowed. "Where are the others?"

"The others? I'm sorry, I don't..."

"You are here for trade, are you not?" he said. "Your people, those with the strange markings on their skin, they only come here to trade with the nobility."

"I'm not with them. I'm here on my own."

"For what purpose?"

"I can't really say," she said, though she regretted the words as soon as she said them. They probably thought she wasn't talking



because she had a secret to keep. Indeed, a woman in their group began speaking rapidly with the man in their own language. Her face did not look like she trusted Jak. But the man silenced her with a word. Apparently he not only knew her language, but also led these people.

He turned back to her, "You will come with us. You will not resist or we will kill you. Understand?"

Jak nodded, "I do."

She let them place a bag over her head and lead her away.

O f course, she could have escaped at any time. They obviously

didn't know what it meant to have all the markings that she possessed. They didn't know that she was the most dangerous person they had ever laid hands on. But she didn't want a confrontation. Something about their leader struck her as important. She was sure that her purpose here had something to do with him, or at least with these people.

Some time later, she was forced to her knees and the bag flew off her head. She blinked to see not the leader, but the woman who had disputed with him. The woman who visibly didn't like Jak. She stared at her quietly while the others gathered around to look at the newcomer. They were in a small wooden structure of some kind, made with multiple sticks lashed together. There was dirt beneath her feet. Smoke from an indoor fire rose through a hole in the roof. That was new. She had never seen a fire in the middle of a room before, rather than in a traditional firepit.

"I do not like you," said the woman in front of her. So she could communicate as well. Interesting. "But Chiang seems to think there's something different about you. So you live. But remember, one small move—" She raised a knife and hovered it mere inches from her face. "—and I will cut you dead."

"I'm not here to hurt anyone."

"Everyone wants to hurt us," said the woman.

"Why?" asked Jak. She glanced around. "Are you running from someone? Perhaps I can help."

"We don't need any of your help," said the woman.

"That is not exactly true." Chiang, the leader, entered the small hut accompanied by a few others. He crouched near the fire and stared at Jak for a long moment. "You are very right, we are running. We run from our oppressors who would have us enslaved, forced to raise crops and livestock only to have it taken away from us. We are the leaders of rebellion."

"Chiang, you can't..." the woman began to say in a sharp tone.

“Quiet, Li,” he said. “If she wanted to kill us she would have done it by now.”

Jak met his eyes. So maybe he did know more about her than he let on.

He raised a hand to gently brush the Telekinetic brand on her forehead. “I have seen your people with these, I know what they do. Yet most have only one, and you have so many.”

Jak nodded, “I’m a bit of a special case among my people.”

“Will you explain why you are here?” he asked. “While I am grateful that you have not destroyed us all, I would like some assurances that you do not intend to betray us to the nobility.”

“It’s kind of a long story,” said Jak. “But I’ll try to sum it up for you. I’m not exactly a favorite of the nobility either.”

She tried to be as brief as possible, but the man kept asking questions. Eventually she told him of the Fae, of her abilities, and her quest for the Pillars of Eternity. The woman, Li, remained skeptical, but Chiang listened intently. And Jak had no reason to lie, so she left very little out if it was relevant.

“These are very strange things you say,” he stroked his chin when she finished. “If I had not seen the magics of your people with my own eyes, I would not believe it. I expect many of my people would not do so.”

“Perhaps I can give some demonstration,” said Jak. Without waiting for confirmation, she mentally reached out to the fire in the center of the hut. The flames rose higher, twisting and turning, its flickering light dancing along the reeds that made up the small hut. Li raised her spear, but did not make any further aggressive moves. Others around them tensed.

Jak concentrated, shaping the flame into something resembling a woman, dancing without a care in the world. Then she let the magic die, and the flames returned to their original form.

“Incredible,” said Chiang. Others that gathered around him were whispering to each other, obviously in awe of what she had just done. And it hadn’t even been that impressive. Relics, what must it be like to live in a culture without brands?

“So do you believe me?” she asked.

Li gave Chiang a sharp look, clearly indicating that she would not trust Jak. Well that was probably fair. She had just appeared out of nowhere. But she was here for a reason. Perhaps it was to help these people in some way.

Chiang tapped his fingers on his chin. “What I believe is likely irrelevant. We can’t exactly have you roaming free, no matter what your intentions are. And if it is, as you say, that you were simply brought here for reasons beyond your knowledge, then perhaps those

reasons will reveal themselves.”

Jak nodded. She had thought much the same thing. But she also didn't want to sit around and do nothing in the meantime.

“I can help with others things,” she said. “If you're lacking food, I can give your people brands that will make food go farther.”

“Absolutely not,” said Li. “We will not allow ourselves to be branded with unknown magics by one who we just met.”

Chiang nodded. “I'm afraid Li is right. That would require an even greater degree of trust. In time, I'm sure we may come to an...”

But just then a small boy came running into the hut, out of breath and pale. He began chattering something in their own language at Chiang. Jak couldn't understand the words, but the moment the boy began to speak, the noise in the hut quickly escalated. Men and women began shouting over each other, trying to ask the young boy questions. Their eyes were wide with fear. Some began filing out of the hut, hurrying to another part of the small camp. Something was happening.

“She led them to us,” said Li, glaring daggers at Jak. She brandished her spear, holding the tip near Jak's neck. But Jak did not recoil. Li wouldn't be able to harm her if she didn't want her to.

“Hush, Li,” said Chiang. His face was a mask of concern, but he did not panic like the others. He thanked the young boy who ran out of the hut. “She could not have brought them. They come from the north, not the south where we found her.”

“What's going on?” Jak stared from Chiang to Li.

“Those of the nobility that would do us harm have found us,” said Chiang. “They're sending soldiers. They will be here in a matter of minutes.”

Jak rose to her feet. Li instantly waved her spear at Jak, but in one fluid motion, Jak broke the bonds that held her, and caught the end of the spear in her hand. For a moment, nobody moved. Jak met Li's wide eyes, trying to emphasize with a look that resisting her would be useless. Then she turned to Chiang. “How can I help?”

Chiang had not reacted to Jak freeing herself. It appeared he did know more about people with brands than he let on. “They do not know the extent of our numbers,” he said. “They must not be allowed to learn more. We must get everyone out as quickly as possible, and lead the soldiers away.”

Jak understood. “A diversion,” she said. That was something she could easily provide.

Chiang turned to Li and spoke a few words in their native language. Li shook her head at first, as if not liking what Chiang was saying to her. But from Chiang's tone, he was insistent. Eventually she bowed her head and stepped outside of the hut with a grunt of

disapproval.

Chiang turned back to Jak. "Perhaps it is fortunate that you are here, Jak. I have instructed Li to lead the people away from here. There are others, in separate rebel cells. She is to join with them."

Jak cocked her head at Chiang. He was speaking as if he would not be with the rest of them. "And what about you?" she asked.

He sighed. "I will attempt to lead the others away. They are here for me."

"Why? What's so special about you?"

"I am one of them. My father is a high-ranking member of the king's council. My leaving is a threat to them."

Now Jak finally understood. This explained how he knew so much about her people, including her language. "They know you're involved with the rebels?"

"I suspect so, though I'm sure they do not yet know how much we have grown in recent years. We cannot allow them to know the magnitude of the threat we pose to them."

Jak nodded, "And I'm assuming you need my help."

Chiang motioned her to come outside. She followed him through the hut's small doorway to the forest beyond. Ahead of her stood rows upon rows of similar huts, all made in haste, but enough to house hundreds of people. Most were scrambling to leave, grabbing what they could and fleeing into the jungle to the rear. They left most of their provisions behind.

Chiang waved a hand at them. "We've lived here in the jungle for some time. If the nobility finds what we've built here, they will not rest until they've tracked us all down and eliminated us. I need you to destroy all evidence of this camp."

Jak took in the sight. All these homes, gone in an instant. She could do it. She could level this place, make it nothing but a smoldering pit.

"And what about you?" she said, facing him.

"As I said, they are here for me. The best chance my people have of getting away is if I give myself up."

Jak frowned. "You don't know what they'll do to you."

"It is unlikely that they will kill me. I am part of the nobility after all. My father would not have it."

"But I could protect you," said Jak. "They won't be able to touch you if I'm on your side."

Chiang smiled. It reminded her of Seph's smile, but sad. "I have no doubt of that. But we must also think of your people. If you are seen helping me, it could provide friction between our two nations. And there is already too much friction as it is."

"So you're saying that I can't let them see me either?"

He nodded. "Once you are done here, I would urge you to leave, or join the rest of my people. Though I'm not sure how well they will receive you without me."

"Li certainly doesn't seem to like me."

"She is cautious, it is her best quality. It has saved us more times than not. But do not let her caution fool you. She would sacrifice her life for these people."

Shouts rose in the distance, and not from those fleeing the camp. These came from the other side, and Jak thought she could just make out the sound of people crashing through the underbrush.

"I must go," said Chiang. He turned away from her to begin moving in the direction of the oncoming soldiers.

"Wait," Jak said. Chiang hesitated. "What if they do kill you? Or at the very least take you prisoner?"

"Then it will be better for me to die a martyr, so that others might live." And with that he slipped into the jungle, quickly disappearing from sight.

Jak turned to survey the camp. Almost everyone was gone now. Li

could be seen at the opposite end, herding the remainder of the camp away from the oncoming soldiers. For a moment, Jak met the woman's eyes. She still did not trust Jak, but she could see something in her, something that explained the faith that Chiang had in the woman. This was a woman who was true to her convictions.

Jak took a moment to breathe. Everything in the last hour or so had happened so fast. Already she felt a responsibility to these people, even though she had only met them mere moments before. Yet they shared a common thread. They were oppressed by their government in a way that she and the Fae could relate. And there was something in Chiang that inspired confidence. She hadn't been around long enough to fully comprehend their situation, or speak with all sides. But she knew good people when she saw them. And if she could help good people, she would.

She had almost forgotten about the second Pillar of Eternity, the object that somehow created this test. What exactly was it trying to tell her? Was she meant to help these people? Or perhaps she was meant to save Chiang from torture or death. Yet the man had been right. She couldn't save him without revealing herself, and that could create worse problems than they already had. And right now the people counted on her to cover up the evidence of their existence. Doing so would take time, and she'd have to hide in order to keep her own identity a secret.

No matter how she thought it through, she couldn't save both Chiang and the people. She had to assume that Chiang was right, that they wouldn't kill him. Perhaps at a later date, she could return to rescue him somehow.

Instead, she turned her attention to the jungle clearing where she now stood. At the very least, she could do what was asked of her. She could give the others a chance to escape. She could allow their dream to live on.

She started with Flamedancing.

Spurts of fire shot out of her hands in all directions, catching the nearest huts on fire. She began running, heading in the direction the other rebels had fled, spewing fire on each side as she ran. When she reached the opposite side of the clearing she turned to get a good look at her handiwork.

Nearly the entire clearing blazed in the afternoon sun, the flames reaching above the tree line. If it wasn't such a lush, humid environment, she might have worried for the safety of the rest of the forest. But she could keep the flames from spreading if need be.

However, flames would not be enough. Chiang wanted all evidence of these people erased. The burnt husks of each dwelling would still be clearly visible to anyone who passed through. She had to obliterate what was left.

This time, she activated her Telekinesis brand, keeping the Flamedancer brand alive as she did so. In the air in front of her, she formed a bubble of sorts out of Telekinetic energy. Then she began feeding that bubble with Flamedancer magic. An enormous fireball began to materialize, its heat rippling the air around her.

With the Telekinetic hold keeping it in place, the ball of flame grew hotter and hotter as she funneled more Flamedancer magic into it. She allowed her Telekinesis to expand, making it even bigger than before. Soon it hung over her head, grown to nearly half the size of the entire clearing.

Shouts echoed from not far away. The enemy was here. It was now or never.

With a roar of effort, she hurled the ball of fire at what remained of the improvised village. It slammed into the ground with a deafening explosion. Quickly, Jak threw up a Telekinetic barrier to protect her from any incoming projectiles. Flaming twigs and bits of dirt and rock fell all around her. Had she not been protected by her Telekinetic barrier, she would have choked on the dust that enveloped her position.

When the air cleared, there was nothing left in front of her but a gaping, burning hole of rubble and ruin. Nothing remained. Not the jungle, not the small huts, nothing. All was ash.

"Now see the consequences of your actions," said Perchel's voice in her ear. And the air rippled around her.

She stood among a crowd of hundreds, possibly even thousands. Everyone crowded into a courtyard, not unlike the main market square in Skyeclass. "What's going on?" she said to the nearest bystander. Yet he did not acknowledge her. None of them did. And their bodies seemed to flow right off of her when she bumped into them. Not a one turned to confirm that they had heard her speak. She swallowed. This must be just a vision, like when she saw her father in



the past.

Finally, she caught a glimpse at what everyone seemed to be staring at.

Near the center of the square was a raised platform. On that platform stood several men, some in armor, another carrying a huge axe. One man knelt beside a large block, his head resting along it.

It was Chiang.

"No!" Jak realized what was happening just as the man to one side of Chiang raised the axe and brought it down in a swift strike.

The crowd roared, but Jak stood in silence. She could have saved Chiang. Back in the jungle she could have gone with him and kept him from being captured. If anyone had seen her face, she could have eliminated them as well.

Just then, she noticed that not everyone in the crowd was cheering. Some were visibly angry, throwing themselves at the soldiers who formed the perimeter around the raised platform. One of the bystanders raised a knife, brandishing it at one of the nearest soldiers.

Who promptly cut the man down.

The crowd erupted into chaos. Many pulled out knives, clubs, pitchforks, anything they could use as a weapon. Soldiers shouted at everyone to get back, while those dressed in finer clothes backed away, doing their best to find a safe exit.

Jak watched for a time, the commotion seemingly flowing around her, yet not touching her directly. Chiang's death had sparked an avalanche. Then a familiar voice uttered a battlecry. Jak turned to see Li there, raising a weapon in her hand, urging the opposition forward. Whatever happened from now on, it would be bloody. They were up against trained soldiers, but perhaps this was the start of something great. A true revolution. Jak could almost see it now.

"Sometimes sacrifice is necessary." It was Perchel's voice. "Thanks to that young leader's martyrdom, the dream will live on until it consumes this corrupt government."

"I understand," said Jak. "If I had chosen to save Chiang over his people..."

"They would have all perished. His sacrifice, and your choice, brought about a greater good."

"Is it too much to ask why sacrifice is even necessary to begin with?" she said, watching as the chaos continued to unfold around her, moving almost as if she was suspended in time, moving at great speeds while she observed. "Could there be a way to save both, and end the corruption without bloodshed, or without hardship?"

"Perhaps, but perhaps not. To learn why we suffer, there is one last part of the test to complete."

“So I passed this part?”

“You did,” Perchel confirmed. “You allowed the needs of many to take priority. The lesson you learned from your father’s death, that sacrifice is sometimes necessary for the greater good, has manifested itself in your decision to let the nobility take Chiang. In doing so, you saved the greater portion. And that decision will have a positive impact on this people. One that will last for centuries to come.”

Yet Jak felt no elation at her accomplishment. There was nothing to rejoice about here. “I wish such choices weren’t necessary,” she said. “I will make the hard decisions when they are needed, but that doesn’t mean I will not stop searching for a better way.”

“As we should all strive to do. Your final lesson awaits.”

Ripple.

Jak clutched at her arms as a sudden cold enveloped her. Light was dim, either early morning or late evening, and snow fell from clouds that blanketed the sky in a dull, gray winter. Wind whipped at her clothing, and goose flesh rose on her exposed skin.

“Does your test involve freezing me to death?” she cried. But Perchel didn’t respond. Only the howling of the frozen wind greeted her.

She took in her surroundings. In the dim light, she could barely make out trees in the distance. But there was nothing but a white blanket of snow in all other directions. She’d best make for the forest.

While she walked, she activated her Flamedancer brand, directing just enough fire at the path in front of her to melt the snow and clear a path. This served the dual purpose of making it easier to travel, and warming the air around her. She rubbed at her arms to increase her blood flow. At least she knew she could stay warm if she had to.

When she drew closer to the forest, a light smell of woodsmoke wafted past her.

She scanned the trees, doing her best to find the source of the smell. If she hadn’t had her Sightseer brand, she might have missed the faint glow coming from much deeper into the forest. With that in sight, she marched forward as best she could given the weather conditions, which thankfully eased up once she was underneath the forest canopy.

The trees here were much more similar to what she had seen in her first test, right before she’d witnessed the transformation of Yewin and his comrades. They were tall and thick at their base. While most had lost their leaves for the winter, their many branches wove together above her, halting the passage of snow and making it easier to get around without heating the ground in front of her, though she still kept a trickle of her magic surrounding her, if only to keep her from freezing to death.

The faint light ahead finally revealed itself to be coming from inside a small cottage. It wasn't large, about the size of the cottage that she had grown up in. It probably didn't have more than two or three rooms. But the soft glow and chimney smoke suggested a warm interior. Even with her magic to aid her, Jak couldn't help but long for the warm embrace of a fireplace, perhaps with a warm drink and a blanket in hand.

The thought encouraged her to draw closer, where she climbed a few small steps to the cabin's main deck. Hopefully these people were hospitable.

She knocked three times on the small wooden door.

**I**mmediately, someone inside moved to answer. Hopefully they

were hospitable enough on such a frozen day. Sometimes harsh times could make for harsh people. Though Jak could survive on her own if it came to that, but she'd prefer to wear something a little warmer at least. Besides, seeing as these were the only people in sight, they probably had something to do with whatever test she had yet to face.

The sound of a bolt unlatching thudded through the door before it swung open.

"Bless me," came a voice from inside. A woman stood silhouetted against a warm firelight on the inside. "What on earth are you doing out there without a coat? Come inside at once!"

Before Jak could say a word, two thin hands grabbed her arm and pulled her inside. The speaker, a small, lean woman of middle years, pushed the door closed behind her.

The feeling inside was magnificent. What remained of the snow in Jak's hair melted straight away, and her gooseflesh returned upon the warmth of the room enveloping her. Even though her brands made survival a lot easier, there was still nothing like stepping into a home with a warm hearth and a savory scent coming from a kettle.

"I'm sorry, I don't wish to intrude."

"Not an intrusion, dear," said the woman. "We hardly see anyone around these parts at this time of year. How on earth did you get all the way out here without something warm on?"

"That's a long story," Jak admitted.

"We love stories," said a voice from the corner. Jak nearly jumped and turned to see a homely man sitting in an armchair, thumbing lazily through a small book while glancing up at her. He looked to be the husband from the way the woman met his eyes affectionately.

"Yes, but first things first," said the woman. "We should introduce ourselves. My name is Anya, and this is my husband Gerald. We own most of the farmland round these parts."

Jak hadn't seen any farmland, though she supposed that's what the snow-covered fields must have been outside of the forest. "I'm Jak,"

she said. "I'm from the south, I think." She wasn't exactly sure where she was, but it couldn't be that far from her homeland. Anya and Gerald both spoke the same language, though their accent was not one that Jak recognized. And given what she knew of the south, you would never see snow storms there. Not like this. It had to be the northern kingdoms.

"You think?" Gerald peered at her over his book. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Now, Gerald, don't be rude," said Anya, though she too looked concerned. She grabbed a chair and brought it to Jak, indicating she sit. Jak did so. Then Anya added, "Why don't I get you a bowl of soup. We have some lovely venison, freshly skinned."

"That would be great, thank you," said Jak. These really were hospitable people. If only everyone was so welcoming, perhaps the Fae wouldn't have so many problems.

Anya set to work fetching a bowl and dipping a ladle into the large kettle over the fire. Gerald, meanwhile, folded up his book and leaned forward.

"Those markings on your arms and forehead," he said. "I've heard of such things in the south."

Jak glanced down at the brands on her arms. It was shocking how few outside of her own kingdom were even aware of brands. She thought everyone used them. Why wouldn't they?

"Yes, they grant certain abilities," said Jak. "I have a few more than most." She gratefully accepted a bowl of steaming hot soup from Anya, letting the steam and smell of the meal waft over her.

"Watch that, young one. It's hot." said Anya.

Jak picked up a spoonful and blew on it before shoving it into her mouth. Instantly a shiver ran up her spine as the warm liquid went down her throat. She eagerly went for a second bite.

"Well then, I don't suppose you'd be willing to tell us more," said Gerald. "As Anya said, we don't get a lot of visitors here at this time of year. Or any time of year, really."

"Well," Jak paused. Where should she start? For some reason she felt like telling the whole truth might be too much, which she hadn't felt with Chiang and the others. They had been in the middle of a rebel crisis that Jak could identify with. These people had a different air about them, a calm, peaceful life. And it was something that Jak did not want to disturb.

So she told them that she was a scholar from Skyecliff, which in one sense was true. She told them how she had come here because her people were facing a crisis over the emergence of the Fae, and the increase of demons. She did not tell them her own role among the Fae, nor about their conflict with the queen. Instead, she made it seem like

she was scouting for new lands that might be more accepting of the Fae. Which was true in a way.

"That is one incredible story," said Gerald. "If I hadn't heard of these demons as you call them, I might not believe you. But my friend Hank swears he saw something just like that not two summers ago. Jumped him and nearly ripped out his throat before running off into the forest. I thought they were the sort of tale you give to children."

Jak nodded, "I guess I don't really expect you to believe all of that. And I won't take much of your time." She passed her empty bowl of soup back to Anya.

"Nonsense, dear," said Anya, accepting the bowl. "You only just arrived, and we can't just let you wander off without a good night sleep and some extra provisions at least."

"Actually, I don't require much sleep," said Jak, rolling up her sleeve to point to one of the brands. "This makes it so I only sleep for a few hours every week."

"Remarkable," said Gerald, leaning in closer. "What we could do with something like that."

Jak nodded but said nothing. It was probably for the best that these people didn't know she could give out such brands. She didn't want them asking her for any, not when she'd only just met them. Besides, how was she to know if this was even real? It was all part of the test, after all.

"Oh hush dear," Anya said to her husband. "Let's just be grateful for what we have. Though I don't suppose," she turned to Jak, with a curious expression on her face. Like a mix of embarrassment and intense longing together. "Would there be any of them markings that could...I don't know." she trailed off, her hesitation getting the better of her. Gerald's expression changed as well, becoming something far more sorrowful.

"What?" Jak probed.

"She wants to know if any of your brands, as you call them, will help with childbirth." Gerald said in a somber tone. He didn't sound like he expected a positive response.

"Oh," said Jak, understanding dawning. She turned to look at Anya, trying to portray the sympathy that she felt. "I'm sorry. There aren't any that I know of."

Anya gave a curt nod. "It's okay, dear. Just thought I'd check, but I shouldn't have imposed on you like that. We've wanted a child for many years now. But it would seem that perhaps it isn't our destiny."

There was that word again, 'destiny.' Though Jak better understood the role it played in one's life, something still bothered her about it.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "I'd help if I could." And that much was

true. Now she understood why the couple had been so nice to her. They were lonely.

That made what she had to say next all the harder. "Thank you so much for your hospitality, but I must be going soon." Jak stood as she spoke and gave a short nod to both of them. "I can't stress enough how wonderful it has been to meet you."

The mood had fallen, that much was clear. Anya smiled but her eyes were deep wells of regret. "We're sorry to see you go. Perhaps you'll come back to visit once you've found what you're looking for."

"If I can, I will," said Jak. And she meant it. For the first time in a long time, she had spent an evening with good people living a simple life. Oh what she would give to go back to a life like that. And what she would give to ensure these people got what they desired. But some things were simply out of her control. Was that what the test was trying to teach her? That sometimes there were things she couldn't change?

That fact had been hammered home a lot recently. It was not something she liked. If you couldn't change something, perhaps someone else could, or perhaps under different circumstances she would find a way. But one thing was for sure, she would never stop trying to find ways to make things better for everyone. Even, and perhaps especially, if the situation seemed hopeless.

"Well here, take something warm to cover yourself with," said Anya, hurrying to one wall and retrieving a small cloak. "And don't hesitate to come back if it gets too frigid out there for you."

"I will," said Jak, accepting the cloak with a grateful nod. She didn't deserve kindness like this.

"You're always welcome here," emphasized Gerald.

Soon after, Jak opened the door and found herself outside again, a strange sensation running through her. It wasn't the cold. It wasn't the fact that she had a duty to perform, though that fact hammered at her consciousness. She had to get on with this test in order to return to Mt. Knot, retrieve the second Pillar of Eternity, and use it to fight Cain and save the Fae.

No, what bothered her was even after all that, with all that responsibility weighing on her, she wanted to stay. The life of Anya and Gerald, though she had experienced it only for a moment, was something to envy. And if they lacked a child, she would gladly agree to be their daughter. She could almost see it now, helping Gerald with work around the farm in the summer, or giving Anya a break in the kitchen during the winter. Going out to chop firewood to keep the hearth going. It was mundane, but in that moment, there was little that she wanted more.

Was this the test? If not of her willingness to accept the inevitable,

was it a test of her conviction? It was certainly a possibility, and one she was unfortunately willing to make. Because after everything she had just seen, she still treasured her responsibility to the Fae. Something had to be done there, and she was the best one to help. No, this quiet life was not for her. Not yet, anyway.

She stepped through the snow, going deeper into the forest. Surely somewhere she would find what the vision wanted her to find. She was still here, which meant there was more to the test. But nothing jumped out at her, no obvious clues.

“I don’t suppose I could get a little help here?” she said aloud after an hour of trudging through the snow.

But the voices of Harglim and Perchel were nowhere to be heard. Whatever the Pillar of Eternity needed her to see, she would have to find it without their help.

While the snow continued to fall, her surroundings brightened as the sun rose and illuminated the sky. But if the air grew any warmer, Jak couldn’t feel it. She clutched at her arms underneath her cloak, and continued on. If only she had a direction to go, something to guide her to whatever it was that the Pillar wanted her to see or do. Had she been wrong to leave the cottage? Was there more for her to do there?

The gusts of wind subsided and the snow began falling at a much more leisurely rate. That was good at least. It looked like the snow storm was beginning to end. And with the sun out she could see better too.

Her ears perked up as a new sound reached them. A faint whimper came from beyond some of the trees ahead of her. Finally something new.

She trudged through the snow, which was still thick despite the trees around her, drawing ever closer to the sound.

Not far ahead, she spied what looked like a small camp. There was a thick blanket large enough for two or three people, and upon closer inspection, a fire pit lay next to it, though the fire had long gone out. The whimpering was coming from underneath the blanket.

She approached cautiously, and gently lifted one corner of the thick covering.



A young boy, of maybe twelve or thirteen years of age, lay

between two larger bodies underneath the blanket. The moment she lifted the corner, his head snapped up and his tear-stained eyes met hers. She didn't have to look at the pale faces of the other two to know that they were dead. She said nothing, and neither did the boy, yet so much passed between them. Everything that must have happened ran through her mind.

These adults were probably the child's parents, dead from frostbite most likely. From their dress, they were poor folk, and possibly sickly. Though she couldn't tell if their hair loss and patchy skin were from a disease or from the cold itself. The way they huddled around the young boy seemed to indicate that their last act was to keep their son warm. But now that they were dead, the young boy probably wouldn't last long.

"Hello," Jak said. "I'm so sorry for what you've lost." She put out an arm, reaching for the young boy.

He recoiled, as if trying to bury himself deeper into the embrace of his departed parents.

"I'm not going to hurt you," said Jak. "I'm here to help. If you stay here, you will die. Do you want to die?"

The boy hesitated, as if seriously considering it for a moment. And in a way, Jak didn't blame him. He had just lost his parents, and there wasn't much hope for him. What more had he to live for? There had been times after the death of her father when she'd wanted to join him. That was before finding her mother, but the memory still haunted her. That had been a dark part of her life, one that she could see playing out in the boy's eyes.

"Listen to me," she tried to keep her words gentle. She had to get the boy to safety, but he needed to understand something first. "You still have something to give to the world. And if you die, you won't be able to give it. If you live, you can bless the lives of many. Perhaps even save lives. Do you understand that? Others that you haven't even met are counting on you." It was a lesson she herself had learned over

the course of the last eighteen months.

A glint of something like resolve entered the boy's eyes, and his tears stopped flowing. He nodded.

"Come on out of there," Jak said, and waved him forward. "I can help you."

Slowly, he dislodged himself from the corpses of his parents, rising to his feet and taking one tentative step forward, then another.

"That's right," she encouraged. Whipping off her cloak, she flung it around the boy as he emerged from underneath the blanket. Then with a flash of magic, she sent a jet of flame at the dead fire pit. It roared to life and its warmth enveloped them both.

The boy stared wide-eyed at her, then at the fire, then back at her. Clearly he'd never seen someone use a brand before. She checked his left hand. Sure enough, just like the couple she'd met earlier, he had no brand. Perhaps she could give him one or two. He would need it if he was going to survive.

"What's your name?" she asked, continuing to check the boy's extremities for any signs of frostbite. Thankfully he had none.

The boy didn't respond at first, but eventually he opened his mouth. Jak gave him an encouraging nod.

"Bretton," he said in a soft voice, so soft she almost didn't hear him.

"Bretton. I'm Jak. What were you and your family doing here, Bretton?"

He wiped at one eye, which was still swollen from crying. "We're from the city. But we weren't allowed to stay. The guards drove us out and we tried to find shelter in the forest. All we had was that blanket."

"I'm sorry," said Jak. "I wish I could have been here sooner."

"How did you do that?" he asked, pointing at the fire.

"It's a little trick I have," she said, trying hard to smile. "I can do other things too, like this."

She activated Telekinesis and picked up some of the nearby snow with her mind. She formed it into three balls and sent them flying at nearby trees. The look of wonder on his face almost made her smile genuine.

"Do you have anywhere to go, Bretton?" she asked once she let her magic fade.

The boy's smile at seeing her abilities vanished, and he shook his head. "No one wants me."

The words sank deep into her soul. But just as the despair over the child's situation surfaced, another thought rose to the forefront of her mind. Anya and Gerald!

Suddenly the solution lay in front of her, plain as day. The kindly couple wanted a child, and here was a child who needed parents. It

was the perfect match.

Perhaps her test was to find this boy and bring him to Anya and Gerald. Just as she'd helped the slave in the southern kingdoms, she could help everyone she'd met in this land so far. It was the perfect solution.

"I know of some people that can help you," she said, adjusting the cloak around Bretton. "We can go there together if you want."

A glimmer of hope entered the boy's eyes. He nodded eagerly.

"That is not the test," said a voice in her ear. It was Perchel.

Jak froze. What did the Sky Fae mean it was not the test?

"The boy needs help," she said aloud. Bretton looked at her quiscically.

"You have been brought here to give him hope, but also to learn that sometimes hardship is what we need. In the future, this young boy will become a great leader among his people. He will save lives as you said he would. But if you bring him to the others, he will grow up a different man. He will become a farmer, and when Anya and Gerald die, he will take over their work. He will never become the hero he is destined to become."

Jak stood dumbfounded, her stomach tying itself into knots. "But they can help him. He needs a warm fireplace and something to eat, not a life of hardship. If I can give that to him, isn't it my responsibility to do so?"

"Is it not your responsibility to do that which is greater for all?"

"But..." Jak broke off, her mouth agape. "But he's a child!"

"Excuse me," said Bretton. "Is everything okay?"

"If you save his life now, you will condemn others to a life of misery and death. If you leave, he will learn to survive. He will learn to value the needs of others."

"But I need to value *his* needs," Jak shouted into thin air. She ignored Bretton who was beginning to look scared now that his savior was talking aloud to nobody.

"This is the burden of destiny. Those of us with a hand in the progression of history must make hard decisions, decisions that may result in temporary pain, but in everlasting betterment."

Jak felt heat rise to her face, and it had nothing to do with the fire she had created. Finally, she said. "No, no I won't leave this child to suffer when I can do something about it. And I will help the others if I can. If I can help it, no one will needlessly suffer. No one."

She grabbed Bretton's shoulders. "Come with me, Bretton. We're going to find you a home."

She reached for his hand, but in that instant, everything went white.

“N o!” she screamed as she sat upright on the stone altar. “I

could have helped him!”

Perchel stood next to Harglim, his eyebrows upturned in an expression of sadness while the older Sky Fae had his mouth open in shock. “You could have helped him now, but it would not have helped him later.” Perchel said.

Jak hoisted herself off the altar. They were back in the canyon, and based on the light in the sky, very little time had passed in the real world, though it had felt like much longer in the dream. She brandished a finger at the Sky Fae. “But you can’t just ask that of people. Anyone could tell you that helping that boy in that moment was the right thing to do.”

“The Pillar of Eternity and the powers that spawned it grant a measure of foreknowledge. That knowledge is a burden for many. It creates situations like these when you will have to forgo saving one person in order to save many.”

“How do you even know that you’re right? The Pillar of Eternity could be wrong, it could have misinterpreted the future. Besides, didn’t you say once that the future is not yet written? How can that be if the Pillar of Eternity knows what’s going to happen to that boy? We can’t assume that it knows everything. I may have just left that boy to die.”

“The Pillar knows,” said Harglim. “Silly girl, you have no faith. You must learn that there are powers greater than yourself, that you serve as their instrument, that we all do.”

Jak scowled. She knew better than to say that she was smarter than whatever higher powers were out there, but the thought crossed her mind. If only these higher powers would talk to her, maybe she could finally get some answers. But that didn’t seem to be happening. Unless the Pillar of Eternity counted as a higher power. It certainly seemed to have a mind of its own.

“I have to reach the top of the mountain,” Jak said, stooping to pick up her pack, spear, and the Pillar of Eternity. At least this Pillar

was still on her side.

Perchel and Harglim glanced at each other nervously. "I'm afraid that will do you no good." Perchel said after a moment's hesitation.

Jak took a deep breath, feeling her anger rise. "Why is that?" she said, though she already knew the answer.

"You did not learn the lesson, you could not leave that boy to a hard but greater destiny. The test is over. You failed."

Jak kept a hard face, feeling her blood pressure rise. She wanted to argue, to say that the test wasn't fair, that it asked her to do things that she could not do. But there was no point in arguing. Besides, the Sky Fae only seemed to be messengers. They did not deserve to receive the brunt of her wrath.

She marched past them, back down the path that led through the cleft, towards where they had first landed. She would find Karlona, Seph, and Marek, and get out of there. She was done.

"If you want to join the rest of the Fae," she called out behind her. "They're headed to a valley not far from here. Go there and you will be welcome."

But the words were hollow to her. After all this time, she'd come this far, only to be rejected by the second Pillar of Eternity. If she, the prophesied Oren, couldn't retrieve the thing, then what hope did they have? She would just have to make do with the one Pillar of Eternity. Maybe she could find the third, wherever that lay. But with all that had gone into finding the others, she wasn't sure she wanted to know what the third one had in store. If it even existed. They'd heard nothing, not so much as a rumor about where it lay.

She emerged out of the canyon to the rocky ledge where most of the Sky Fae's stone huts lay. It didn't take her long to spot Karlona, who looked as if she had been waiting for Jak. She rushed towards her daughter the moment Jak emerged from canyon, but drew up short when she saw the expression on Jak's face.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I failed. The second Pillar of Eternity has rejected me. We're leaving." She stalked past her mother, choosing not to look her in the eye.

Karlona didn't say anything in response, and Jak did not turn to see if she was following. Instead, she spied the nearest Sky Fae and approached him.

"Is there a way to get back on the main road from here?" she asked. The Sky Fae was about to say something when she added, "without flying?" She didn't want any more assistance from these people, even if it was well intentioned. They would get back on their own.

"Uh, yes," he said, somewhat taken aback by her abruptness.

“Though it will be difficult.” He pointed towards where their stone outcropping met the rest of the mountain. “Follow that around this central peak, and it will take you to the ridge, which you can follow to the mountain’s peak.”

“Thank you,” said Jak. She didn’t tell him that she had no intention of going further up the mountain. But if they could make it to the ridge, they could follow that back down as well. They’d be right back where they had been before they even met the Sky Fae.

Karlona joined her, this time joined by Marek and Seph. All three had a look of concern on their faces, Marek especially.

“Your mother tells us that you failed to pass the test?” Marek said. “Please tell me that isn’t true.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you,” she said. “But what it demanded of me was unreasonable. We’ll find some other way to create Illadar.”

“But...” he protested.

“Are you all ready?” Jak interrupted. Karlona and Seph nodded, though Marek continued to stare at her like he had never seen her before. There was betrayal in his eyes. Seph, on the other hand, said nothing. Wise.

They set out, finding the rocky ledge that led from the stone outcropping that served as the home of the Sky Fae, back around the peak and to the ridge that led up and down Mt. Knot. She caught a glimpse of Perchel and Harglim, among the many other Sky Fae that chose to watch them go. She hoped they did eventually choose to join the rest of the Fae in the valley. As much as she did not enjoy her most recent experience, she couldn’t hold that against the Sky Fae. They weren’t the cause. And besides, they could be very useful as scouts to warn against dangers or find valuable resources.

Marek didn’t protest further, though Jak was sure he would do so once they reached the ridge and she insisted they go down, not up. But she would deal with him when the time came. Right now, she just needed to let her mind unwind.

They walked for some time covering very little ground. The path was, indeed, difficult. Probably because it was something never used by the Sky Fae, who could fly after all. Some parts required they hug the stone cliff while they travelled along it, with no more than a few inches of footing to work with. The sun was beginning to set, and they worked hard to get back to the ridge before they lost all their light.

When they finally reached the ridge, Jak turned to the left to head back down the mountain instead of up.

Just as she predicted, Marek spoke. “Jak.” he said.

She sighed, and turned to face him. “Marek, I can’t keep going. It won’t do any good anyway, the Pillar rejected me.”

“This is why I came back, Jak,” he said, his voice pleading, and his

hands clasped together in front of him. "Why would someone from beyond send me back here, if it knew you were going to fail?"

"Not everyone completes their destiny, Marek." Jak said. "If a higher power sent you back to us, then it was wrong. It's as simple as that."

She turned to continue on back down the mountain.

But she paused. A roaring sound like wind, but louder and deeper, was coming out of the west. She squinted in that direction. The others all stopped and stared as well.

The sun was still going down, and it shone in their faces. Jak narrowed her eyes further, trying to make anything out. The sound increased, growing clearer as it did so. There was something familiar about it.

Jak's eyes widened as she finally realized what the sound reminded her of. In that instant, she finally caught a glimpse of something huge in the distance, flying directly into the path of the sun, its shadow passing over all of them. Even from this distance, and in the fading light of the sun, she could make out enormous wings, and a huge reptilian body.

"What is that?" said Seph. It was the first thing he had said that whole trip. He was staring at the oncoming beast with a mixture of awe and fascination on his face. The others were also staring in wonderment at what approached.

But Jak knew better, and the only thing she felt was dread. It curled into knots inside of her, and threatened to consume what remained of her resolve.

"We have to run," she said. "Run, now!"

She did not pause to see if they would obey her, but began sprinting as fast as she could through the mixture of rock and snow, down the ridge.

"What is it?" Seph asked again, this time calling at her while he ran behind.

"That is the dragon from Mt. Harafast." Jak shouted back. "If we don't get away, it could kill us all."

While she ran, she swung the Pillar of Eternity off her back. She could see no other alternative. If they did not get away fast, they would not get away at all.

But just as she was about to activate its magic, another familiar feeling crept into her bones. The dread that caused her insides to twist wasn't just caused by the dragon. There was something else there, something she also recognized from her time in Mt. Harafast, this feeling of someone or something made of pure evil, and approaching fast.

She drew up short as the realization hit, but also as the huge form

of the dragon slammed into the ridge ahead of them. Its orange and gold scales gleamed in the light of the setting sun, and it turned two glowing eyes to face them. Muscles rippled in its chest and the arms it used to steady itself as it landed. Those arms bore two powerful wings.

But Jak was no longer looking at the dragon. She was looking at the man riding atop it.

In all actuality, he couldn't really be called a man. He bore a passing resemblance to one, with a head, arms, and legs that straddled the back of the dragon where its neck met its wings. But beyond that, he looked more demon than human. His flesh was a melted mess, hanging off his bones as if by magic. He wore a small coat of skins around his waist, but nothing else. Brand lines covered his body from head to toe, some of which glowed on his approach. He was different from the last time Jak had lain eyes on him, but there was no denying that familiar feeling of dread in her stomach.

Cain had finally found them.



Jak braced herself, brandishing the Pillar of Eternity in front of her.

“I told you I would be here soon,” said Cain from atop the dragon. The beast regarded them with exposed teeth and hateful eyes, but it did not move while Cain spoke. Somehow, Cain had managed to subdue the dragon, bending it to his own will.

“You took one Pillar away from me, I will not let you have the second.” said Cain. “Hand over what you took, walk away, and I will let you live.”

Jak hastily ran through her options. Cain thought they were still traveling to find the second Pillar of Eternity. He didn’t know she had already planned on leaving. But she didn’t believe for a second that he would let them go if she gave him what he wanted. And he likely knew better than any of them that she could run away using the power of time that the Pillar granted. And yet, the dragon blocked the way ahead of them. She couldn’t go back down the mountain without getting around it, and there was nothing but a steep drop on either side of the ridge. There was no way they could make it, even if she could slow time.

That meant they had to go up the mountain. But if they did that, the dragon would likely pursue them, and she couldn’t keep up the magic forever. That left her with only one option.

Fight.

She activated the Pillar of Eternity. Snow kicked up by the wind hung in midair as time slowed. In her right hand she grasped her father’s spear.

She ran at the dragon. Even though time stood still, or nearly so, she couldn’t help but feel like the dragon was still staring her down as she approached. It was so big, she couldn’t reach its head, or Cain where he sat on its shoulders. So instead she took her spear and stabbed downward at the thing’s front claws.

The spear tip bounced off the carapace like it was hardened stone.

She tried again, aiming for a gap in the thing’s scales. But the gaps

would not allow anything to penetrate them.

She looked around frantically, trying to find a solution. Of course nothing could penetrate its hide. It had laid in hibernation for countless years in a giant pool of lava. There was no way she could harm it with a simple spear. And most of her brands would be useless.

She tried shocking it with her Thunder brand, but that had little effect. She tried pushing at it with Telekinesis, but that did nothing as well.

Suddenly a wave of nausea passed through her, the feeling she got when the Pillar of Eternity didn't like what she was doing. Like when she tried to kill.

But this was Cain, and a dragon. If she didn't kill them, she had no chance of survival. She tried to communicate that fact with the Pillar of Eternity somehow, but to no noticeable effect. These sentient Relics could be stubborn.

She backed away from the dragon. They had only one option now. She couldn't attack. They could only run. And if they ran they would most likely be trapped further up the mountain, but it was all they had open at the moment. Perhaps once the dragon took flight again, she could use the Pillar to slip back down with the others.

Something was happening with the dragon. Its torso was beginning to glow, and its mouth was opening. Even with the power of the Pillar of Eternity, she could still see its jaws opening, slowly by her perspective, but what must have been incredibly fast in the real world. Light shone from deep within its throat.

It was about to spew fire at them. Perhaps she had been using the Pillar of Eternity long enough for Cain to realize she had disappeared. So now he was attacking.

Indeed, fire flew out of the dragon's open mouth, moving at a visible speed even for her. It was about to envelop the others.

She turned and ran back to her mother, Marek, and Seph. Taking her mother by the arm first, she brought the Shadow Elf into her time bubble.

"What..." Karlona said.

"No time," Jak shouted. "Grab the others, and run!"

Not stopping to argue, Karlona grabbed Marek who was closest. Jak's childhood friend blinked before realizing what was happening. "We have to get out of the way!" he bellowed, looking truly frightened for the first time that Jak could remember since his reappearance. "He's going to kill us." He looked like he couldn't believe it.

"Come with me," Jak tugged at her mother's hand. She couldn't move as fast when connected to the others, and they still had to get Seph. Seph was closest to the dragon, and several paces away. And those flames were moving with a speed Jak couldn't imagine. Even

with the power of time, it would take only seconds before Seph was enveloped. She had to get to him and bring him into the time bubble so they could escape.

Even though not much time had passed in the real world, Seph had slowly brought his hand up to shield his eyes from the flames. Not that shielding oneself would do much good.

Though actually, now that she was closer, she saw that his arm wasn't out to shield his face, but was raised up in something like defiance. Like he was about to launch his own magical attack. But Seph had no brands. There was nothing she could do. The flames were almost on him, and she wasn't close enough to stop it.

As she closed the distance between her and Seph, something curious began to happen. The flames that emanated from the dragon cut off, and what was about to reach Seph simply began to fade in an instant, visible even to Jak as she sped through time. What was happening?

Finally, she grabbed a hold of Seph's arm, bringing him into the time bubble.

He glanced at her, distracted. "Jak, it's okay. I don't think it was going to kill me."

"Why on Earth would you think that?" Jak said, tugging on his arm to get him to move. But he held his position.

"I don't know, I felt it the moment he came close. I can almost hear what it's thinking."

"Cain just wants to kill us and take the Pillar of Eternity off my corpse. I could have told you that."

"No, not Cain. The dragon." He began pulling back at Jak. "Let me go, Jak."

"What? Of course not, don't be crazy."

"It's in pain," he said, oblivious to her protests. He pulled away from her, stretching his free hand in the direction of the dragon.

"Seph, what are you doing?" But Seph pulled too hard, extracting his hand from hers.

Of course, with the power of time in her grasp, all that happened was that Seph stopped moving the moment he escaped her touch. She could have reached out and taken him again. But something stopped her. Something strange was definitely going on. The dragon had stopped shooting fire out of its muzzle, and she'd never seen Seph like this before. Curious, she let the power of time drop for a moment.

Seph took one step forward, then another. His arm extended to the reptilian monster ahead of them.

"There you are, Jak." Cain finally laid eyes on her. "I see that you're putting that Pillar of Eternity to good use. But you won't get past me up here. You have only one way to go, and sooner or later I

will wear you down.”

Jak swallowed, he was right. She had already figured that out. Though Cain wouldn't stay put if she continued up the mountain, towards where the second Pillar of Eternity supposedly lay.

Something clicked as her brain finally landed on a problem that she hadn't realized was bothering her. Why wasn't Cain trying to block her path to the Pillar?

The dragon roared and reared itself onto its hind legs. Its throat began to glow again and Cain gave it a light tap on the side, like one would when comforting a horse. Yes, now was not a time to think. Now was a time to survive.

With Cain's attention fixed on Jak, he had forgotten about Seph. The brandless preacher was making his way closer and closer to the dragon, his arm still extended as if offering it for a dog to smell, to gain its trust. But this was no dog. Shouldn't she call out to him, warn him that the beast would likely bite off his hand if it did not roast it first? But if she did that, then Cain might remember Seph was there, and do something about it.

Yet something did appear to be happening. The dragon had forgotten about its rider, and instead kept its gaze fixed on Seph. Ever so slightly, it cocked its head, mesmerized by something no one else could see.

She had to keep Cain distracted or he might ruin everything. She met the demon king's eyes and shouted, "I'm not afraid of you, kinslayer. I'm not the helpless little girl you met in Mt. Harafast."

"As I have seen," he said. "But I know your biggest weakness."

And in that instant his eyes flew towards Seph. He beat his hand against the dragon, causing a shock of some kind to fly through the beast. It roared, and its belly glowed as it prepared to send a fiery inferno hurtling at them. It would consume Seph first.

"Your weakness is that you care," he called, just as the dragon opened its mouth to consume Seph.

She had to get to him fast. If those jaws did not crush Seph's defenseless body, the flames would consume him.

She prepared herself to activate the Pillar of Eternity again. Stupid Seph, why couldn't he have stayed behind like she wanted? She couldn't fight Cain and think about him too. In a way, Cain was right. Of course caring was not a weakness, but it did mean that she needed to get everyone out of harm's way before she could properly deal with Cain.

But before she could activate the Pillar, Seph's hand flew up until it touched the underside of the dragon's jaws. Instantly, the flames in the beast's belly extinguished themselves, and the dragon paused its aggression.

For a moment, Jak forgot all about Cain, or using the power of time to stop him from killing Seph. And it would seem Cain felt the same way. They both stared at Seph in a new light, who gently patted the dragon's muzzle. The enormous reptile seemed to...soften. Its muscles uncoiled and its eyes slid out of focus. It almost looked like it was enjoying Seph's touch.

"What is this?" said Cain. There was genuine bewilderment in his voice. "Get away!"

Cain raised a hand and a globe of fire began forming there. Like the one Jak had created to destroy the eastern village during her test, but smaller and more concentrated.

Just as he hurled it at Seph, Jak dropped her spear and reached out an arm. Her telekinetic abilities burst from her, slamming into the fireball as it was about to reach Seph's face. It veered off course and slammed into the dragon's neck.

With a roar, it reared up onto its hind legs, more from surprise than pain. Cain clung to its neck to avoid being thrown off.

Jak prepared a fireball of her own, fueling it with Flamdancing, but containing it with Telekinesis. But just at that moment, figures shot into the sky to her right. They were people, tiny people.

Sky Fae.

Small rocks and even balls of snow began raining through the air, peppering Cain and the dragon. The Sky Fae zipped around them, throwing what they could at the beast and his rider. What were they thinking? They couldn't possibly think that stones would have any damaging effect.

But it soon became apparent that hurting the dragon was not their intention. Instead, they were distracting it. Its head swiveled from one side to the other, snapping at Sky Fae that got too close, and roaring in frustration when he couldn't catch any of them. Now Jak could finally see the Sky Fae's greatest power. They were fast.

Each one maneuvered through the air using its wings like a great bird of prey, one that managed to duck and weave out of the way of the dragon's jaws or beating wings.

"Focus!" yelled Cain. But he wasn't talking to Jak anymore. He was talking to the dragon. He sent a jolt of Thunder into the dragon's hide, but that only seemed to aggravate it further. With a rush of wind that nearly blew Seph and Jak over, the dragon beat its wings and rose into the air, chasing after the Sky Fae. They were providing the perfect distraction.

Despite Cain's protests, the dragon retreated, flying towards a column of Sky Fae, who led it away to the west, back in the direction it originally came. By now the sun had mostly set, and twilight limited her vision, but it wasn't long before the dragon was nothing but a dark

spot in the sky, its roars echoing across the mountains.

“**T**hat will not keep him for long,” Perchel alighted on the

ridge next to her. “If you use your Pillar of Eternity, you can make it down the mountain and away before he can find you again.

She stared down at the little man. “What will you do?” she asked.

“We will make do. We may have to flee and join you as you offered. The enemy will not let us remain in peace after this.”

“And what of the Pillar of Eternity that you are meant to protect,” said Jak, though she knew the answer.

Perchel’s face fell. “We were never capable of defending it from an enemy like him.” He waved a hand in the direction of Cain.

“But if I couldn’t pass the test, how is the Pillar in danger of being taken by him?”

Perchel gave a soft shrug. “The Pillar grants its abilities to the user of its choice, but it is not immune to influence, or to destruction. It may take time, but he would be able to corrupt it eventually, or destroy it to prevent it from falling into anyone else’s hands.”

“He wants it too much,” said Jak. “He won’t destroy it.”

“He might, if he thinks you are on the verge of taking it,” said Marek. “I don’t think we should rule out that possibility.”

“But I’m not about to take it. I failed the test.”

“Yes, but he doesn’t know that,” said Karlona. “Regardless, the Pillar is in danger.”

Jak glanced at her mother, meeting those knowing green eyes. She knew what her mother was thinking. Even if she couldn’t retrieve the Pillar, they had a responsibility toward it.

“Can the Pillar even be destroyed?” she asked no one in particular, though she looked at Perchel. This one—” she brandished the polished black shaft in her hand. “—was trapped in a pit of molten rock for years without a mark.”

Perchel was shaking his head. “The elements, though seemingly powerful, are yet nothing when compared to some magical abilities.”

Seph spoke. “Cain managed to survive the lava as well, though not completely unscathed. I think we could probably assume that he can

create something far worse than molten rock.”

Perchel nodded. “Indeed. This Cain, if he is capable of taming a dragon, is capable of destroying the Pillar if it suited him.”

Again, Jak faced her mother, trying to communicate silently with the woman. When Karlona gave her the barest of nods, Jak rolled her head back and closed her eyes. Why did she always have to do the right thing?

She opened her eyes. “We don’t have a lot of time. The moment Cain gets control of the dragon, he’ll be back to claim the Pillar for himself. We need to get there before he does.”

“We’ll need to move fast,” said Marek, with a satisfied smile. This had been what he wanted all along. Well, they had come this far. They might as well do what they could to retrieve the Pillar of Eternity, even if Jak couldn’t wield it. At least they could keep it from Cain. And if they couldn’t retrieve it for whatever reason, then this would be their last stand against their greatest enemy.

If only she had the rest of the Fae with her. If she could link with the others, especially the trolls, she’d feel more confident about going up against Cain. But for now, they had to make do with what they had.

“I could use the power of time to get us there quickly, but I have a feeling I’ll need all my strength, and the Pillar has a tendency to use it up.”

Perchel did not skip a beat. “We can take you.”

Jak wasn’t sure she liked being carried about by the Sky Fae, but she could not deny it was the best course of action. “That sounds like a plan. Get us there, and we can take care of the rest.”

Perchel nodded, “I’ll gather a few more of the others and we’ll get you there as fast as we can.”

He stretched his wings wide and leapt into the fading twilight. Perhaps now would be a good opportunity to speak to Seph. She turned and locked eyes with him.

“What happened?” She didn’t need to specify what she was talking about.

Seph shook his head, almost like he was dazed. “I...honestly don’t know. When the dragon approached I thought I could feel something about it. It drew me to it. And I’m certain that it felt the same way. I’m not sure I could explain it.”

“It certainly doesn’t match anything else we’ve seen before.” said Karlona, coming to step close to Jak and Seph. “But dragons are something we all thought were part of a long-forgotten myth. We have no idea what to expect with them.”

“I’m not sure I like it,” said Marek.

“Why?” said Jak, turning to look at her old friend. “From where I



stood the dragon's hesitation was the only thing that saved us."

"It fits too well," he clarified. "First, Seph decides to come with us with little explanation, like he had some foreknowledge that he was going to be needed. And now this?"

"You're suggesting I planned this somehow?" Seph said with a raised eyebrow.

"No, not that," said Marek. His face was bunched up in a mixture of frustration and confusion. "It just seems too convenient, if you know what I'm saying. Too unnatural."

"And you coming back from the dead is any better?" Jak said with a raised eyebrow of her own.

"I suppose that is a good point," said Marek with a half grin.

Jak nodded. Of course the implication that Seph had some kind of secret was absurd. She knew Seph, and he would never ally himself with Cain or anyone else for the purposes of deception. If he said he didn't know what happened, then he didn't know. But Marek was right about one thing. It all seemed a bit too coincidental that Seph had insisted he go, and only now managed to prove his worth. But she didn't think the coincidence had anything to do with any secret motives on Seph's part. Yet the alternatives did not comfort her much.

Perchel flew back into view with seven other Sky Fae, two for each of them. Jak put Seph and his strange connection with the dragon out of her mind. Now was not the time to think about that. If they survived the night, perhaps they would have a chance to philosophize further.

The Sky Fae picked them up and, after a moment to steady themselves in the air, began speeding towards the mountain peak.

Jak watched the top of the mountain grow closer and closer while the sun finally set completely. She could still see, mostly due to a full moon and the slight advantage given her from her Sightseer brand.

"There are demons down there," said Karlona as they drew closer. The Sky Fae carried her to the right of Jak. Apparently her Shadow Elf eyes were still superior to Jak's at night.

The news didn't surprise Jak. They had, after all, seen the demons run past them and up the mountain earlier that day. It was no wonder that they had already reached the peak.

"What are they doing?" she called out to her mother.

"Nothing, they're just waiting there."

"They will not be able to retrieve the Pillar of Eternity for their master," said Perchel, who was one of the Sky Fae that carried Jak. "They await his arrival."

"They'll attack the moment we land," said Karlona.

"Best we get it over with now," Jak replied. "Let's take out as many as we can before Cain arrives."

By now Jak could see them too. Dark human-like shapes against the white of snow. They covered the peak of the mountain.

"There's a stone platform at the top," said Perchel. "We'll put you down there. You'll have more room to maneuver and fight."

"Thank you," said Jak.

"I'm afraid there's not much more we can do. Our combative skills are limited."

"Don't worry," said Jak. "We've faced more demons than this. We can handle ourselves."

Though she'd never faced this many demons without more help, and not with Cain threatening to appear at any minute. But she didn't mention that.

"Get ready," said Perchel as they swooped in lower, circling downward to the flat structure he had mentioned earlier.

"Go ahead and drop me now," said Jak. "I can survive the fall."

Perchel did not hesitate to obey. Without another word, he and the other Sky Fae that carried her, let go.

Jak plummeted towards the snow-capped peak, towards the dark shapes below, and summoned her magic.

She hit the stone platform with a booming thud that echoed around her. To absorb the fall, she dropped to one knee and placed one hand on the ground. In the same instant she hurled a wave of Telekinesis in all directions. She was surrounded by demons, but the wave of magic picked them up and tossed them like rag dolls. Some fell too far to recover, tumbling over a cliff face on one side, or a snow-covered slope that was too steep to climb on the other.

Yet those that were left whirled on Jak, just as the Sky Fae came in closer, dropping Karlona, Marek, and Seph to the ground. Seph brandished his bow and Karlona's knives came out of their sleeves in a fluid motion. Marek activated his Telekinesis brand.

Jak slid the spear out of its space on her back and tossed it at Marek. He caught it out of the air and stared at Jak. It was the first time she had trusted him with a weapon.

"Won't you need it?" he said.

Jak turned to face the demons. "It will only get in my way."

Then the first demon pounced.

She shrugged it off with a wave of Telekinesis. The demon flew through the air and landed against a stone pillar with a crunch.

She activated Flamedancing, sending jets of fire rushing at the onslaught of demons. High pitched screams increased around her. But for every demon that fell in the fire, another took its place. More and more demons were joining them now, attracted by the light of her flames. They were coming from every side, having covered the entire peak before their arrival. Now they were all converging on one spot.

And while she killed one demon after another, as did her companions, she also knew one more thing.

If Cain wasn't on his way before, he was now.

The echo of a headache pierced her forehead, not painful, but perhaps a shadow of what she had once felt when Cain was very mad. He was coming for them, that much was certain.

She continued to take the demons out one by one, using a combination of Flamedancing and Telekinesis. She wielded balls of white-hot fire, and sent beams of energy into their foes. Not one could get close to her, though she did have to keep an eye on her companions.

Seph let his last arrows fly into the bodies of oncoming demons. Marek guarded his back, while Karlona carved a path through their enemies to one side. They were doing fine, though every once in a while she sent a wave of magic at a demon lunging at Seph and Marek. She could at least give them a little less to think about.

More demons crowded around them, snapping their jaws and baring long fangs and huge claws, products of their transformation. Jak nearly slipped on the snow-covered stone as she rushed to meet them. But she caught herself and sent a jolt of lightning through the nearest demons. The lightning passed through several of them before losing energy momentum.

But she couldn't rely on her Thunder brand alone. If she overused it, she could lose energy quickly, and there was no thunderstorm to draw from. She was starting to feel drained already.

All while the dread was beginning to build up again in her stomach.

"He's coming!" she yelled as she rammed the butt of the Pillar of Eternity into a nearby demon head.

The demons nearest them continued to fight, but those that still climbed the mountainside to get to them slowed to a crawl. They knew their master was coming.

Jak dispatched the last demon in the vicinity and took a moment to survey her surroundings, trying to find something, anything that could help them.

The platform they stood on spread out for several feet in all

directions, but on one end, she could make out some stairs, partially covered in snow. There were two sets of stairs, wrapping around opposite sides of the mountain's final peak, a giant monument of rock that stretched maybe fifty feet above them. What was at the top? She had a pretty good guess.

But there was no time to climb the stairs and discover if the second Pillar of Eternity was there or not. A roar announced the coming of the dragon. It swooped into view, with Cain still riding. A cry went up among the demons, something akin to ecstasy. They cheered for their master.

Fire burst out of the mouth of the dragon, shooting straight down at them. Jak threw up her hands, dropping the Pillar of Eternity as she ward off the dragon fire with both Telekinesis to shield them, and Flamedancing to redirect the fire. Her companions only stood watching, completely helpless to do anything about the dragon attack. Seph's eyes followed the beast as it circled around. Perhaps he could calm it somehow like he did last time.

The dragon breath abated and she stooped to pick up the Pillar of Eternity. She couldn't allow that to fall into Cain's hands. She couldn't allow either of them to fall into his hands. And she didn't have time to try and retrieve the second Pillar from where it likely stood at the peak. This would have to be a final stand with Cain.

A form came crashing down from the sky with a thud that shook the stone platform. Cain turned to look at her, his horrid, melted face regarding her with loathing. His eyes burned an icy blue in the darkness, not unlike her mother's green eyes, but colder.

The dragon continued in its flight, now that its rider had left. It didn't leave, however, but continued circling the mountain.

Cain didn't stop to speak, by the time he had straightened, he formed a fireball in one hand and threw it at Jak. She threw herself to one side, whilst simultaneously swatting at the fireball with Telekinesis. It crashed into the ground behind her, sending up shards of stone.

He was not messing around, he was not goading her. He knew this would be a fight to the death, and he would not delay.

"Get back!" she yelled at her mother, Seph, and Marek. "Let me fight him."

None of them protested, and Cain kept his gaze fixed on her. He knew she was the primary threat, and her companions knew better than to do anything stupid. None of them would stand a chance against Cain, and everyone knew it.

Jak formed a fireball in her own hand, sending it hurtling at Cain. He tossed it off with a casual wave. She sent a bolt of electricity speeding at him, a direct hit!

But the Thunder brand had seemingly no effect on him. If anything, it may have helped him. His body absorbed the energy and Cain smiled slightly. Stupid, she should have thought about absorption. If she could use a thunderstorm to fuel her brand, it made sense that one could draw from another's Thunder brand as well.

"You're weak," he said, advancing towards her. "You have no idea the power you could wield."

But she *did* have power he did not. It was time to put it to good use.

The Pillar of Eternity flared to life in her hand, and time stood still. Jak took a deep breath then ran to Cain's opposite side. If the Pillar wouldn't let her kill Cain outright, at least she could get the drop on him from behind.

She let the power drop and shot a fireball right at Cain's back.

He whirled and blocked the blow, but she was much closer this time. He staggered back one step from the force of her attack.

She activated the Pillar once more, moving to another side. Then another, then another.

Finally, one fireball managed to connect.

Cain yelled in pain as his flesh burned. But to Jak's surprise, the red and black burnmark quickly faded before her eyes. Cain smiled. "Your attacks are not capable of harming me. Nothing can harm me!" He shot a massive beam of hot fire at her. Even as she activated the Pillar of Eternity, the flames were almost on her before she managed to scramble out of the way.

She had to keep trying. If one attack had gotten through, perhaps more would do so as well. She just had to make sure that she destroyed Cain's body so much that his healing abilities couldn't save him. Relics, how did he manage to heal so fast! What kind of brands were they dealing with here, and how could she have any chance of beating him when she didn't know what they were.

She attacked him from all sides, keeping as much distance as she could. In one instance, just as she let time resume its normal pace to send another fireball his way, a huge force rammed into her.

She recognized it instantly as a Telekinetic push, but one far stronger than anything she had managed to conjure up. She flew through the air over the lip of the stone platform to the icy slopes beyond. She tumbled, feeling the ground give way beneath her. She was falling. She tumbled into a sharp bolder which would have broken her back had she not possessed Toughness. She scrambled to find something to hold onto as she began sliding off the rock.

And the Pillar of Eternity slipped from her fingers.

"No!" she cried and desperately reached for the Pillar with Telekinesis, willing it to come back to her hand.

But the Pillar spun out of control, pushed by a greater force than her own.

Cain rose into the air above, staring down at her, a look of pure triumph on his face. He glanced down at the Pillar of Eternity as it fell far below. "I'll pick that one up later."

She had to get the power of time back. It was the only edge she had against Cain. Her attacks would be useless without it.

"But first things first," Cain continued. A huge fireball began forming over his head, much like the one Jak had used to destroy the abandoned eastern village. He was going to wipe her off the face of the earth.

A glint in the moonlight, and something dark plunged its way into Cain's side. They had forgotten about Karlona. She materialized behind Cain, her green eyes visible from where Jak lay hanging to a large rock.

Jak scrambled to her feet, and called on her brand of Telekinesis to propel her forward and to one side, back to the stone platform but away from Cain. He would not remain distracted for long.

Indeed, he whirled on Karlona with a backhanded slap that send the Shadow Elf flying. To Jak's horror, just as she alighted back on the platform, he followed up with a jet of white-hot flame that burst from his palm like an inferno, directly at her mother. Forgetting about herself, Jak threw up a Telekinetic shield to redirect the blast, but it was all she could do to keep it from collapsing. Thankfully, her mother used the split second Jak gave her to roll out of the way and disappear entirely. Jak said a silent prayer of thanks for Shadow Elf abilities.

Cain's eyes rounded on her, his attention once again focused on his greatest threat, even though Jak did not feel like much of a threat in that moment. She had lost the Pillar of Eternity, she could not attack Cain directly, and running away would only delay the inevitable.

She could try to retrieve the fallen Pillar, but that would take time to search for where it had fallen, and that was time she did not have.

But she did know where another Pillar lay...

Without pausing to think it through, she jumped, launching herself into the air with her brand, in a direct line for the ultimate mountain peak. She passed the stairs that led there in a single moment, overshot the top, and finally got a good look at her goal.

The second Pillar of Eternity stood embedded in a rocky altar of some sort, its length protected from the elements by stone archways. Unlike the first Pillar of Eternity, this one was on display, for anyone who made it this far to see. Also unlike the first Pillar, this staff was a polished white color, with black lines extending up and down its length. Its colors contrasted opposite that of the first Pillar.

The dragon roared from nearby, and Cain would be right on her tail, so she had to act fast.

She ran forward and grabbed hold of the second Pillar of Eternity.

She heaved to pull it out of its stone basin, but it did not budge. It remained locked in place, calm and heedless to the chaos that was erupting around them.

"Come on," she yelled. "I'm trying to help you, why won't you help me."

But the staff remained silent. There were no visions, no quiet voices in the back of her mind. It remained as cold as the mountain it sat on.

Suddenly, she was flying, launched into the air by an attack from the rear. She felt a searing heat in her back as her clothes caught fire. She tumbled down the stairs and rolled, the flames in her clothing dying out as she did so.

"You will not take it!" Cain spat. She whipped her head around to see him standing there, next to the Pillar. He still thought the Pillar would go with her. He didn't know it had rejected her.

She had half a mind to tell him right there, to tell him that he had nothing to fear, that the Pillar was useless for her. But instead she scrambled to her feet as Cain reached for the white Pillar and pulled.

Nothing happened.

Jak let out a gasping breath. He wasn't able to take it either. He tugged and he pulled, but the Pillar of Eternity would not come free.

Fury contorted the already grotesque face of her enemy. His blue eyes shot to meet hers. "You have bewitched it somehow."

"I have," she lied. "It will never serve you." Lies were her only defense now. She had to make him believe that the Relic could not bend it to his will, even though she had no doubt he could do so with enough time.

"You know I cannot allow you to have it," he growled.

"There is nothing you can do."

Cain laughed, a rasping sound that came from deep within him. In it, Jak heard her own doom. Power crackled around him. He was going to kill her. She had to move. But his next words stopped her. "If I cannot have it, than no one will."

No, he was going to destroy the Pillar of Eternity. They had discussed the possibility, but she never thought he would actually do it.

"It's indestructible," she screamed. "Your attacks won't have any effect."

He laughed again. "My father's Relics are very powerful, true. But even Relics of the highest order are vulnerable to dragon fire."

Cain raised one hand and a light shot from it, straight up into the



sky. It was more than a light. It was a beacon, a call. A call for the dragon.

The dragon roared in the distance, growing closer. Jak stared at the skies. It was approaching fast, brought on by its master. As it flew, its chest began to glow, heat building inside of it.

Cain rose into the sky, carried by his own telekinetic powers. He hovered just out of reach of the platform, away from the dragon's target. "Say goodbye to your last hope, Jak," he said, before lowering himself down to the stone platform below them. Down to where the people she cared about most would be.

The dragon fire erupted out of the beast's mouth, hurtling towards the mountain top.

Without thinking, Jak threw up a Telekinetic shield, protecting both her and the Pillar of Eternity from the inferno. She tapped into her own Flamedancer powers to help, to try and siphon off as much of the flames as she could. But there was just too much of it. She rose to her feet, and screamed, feeling every muscle ache from the strain of keeping the shield in place. It would not last for long.

She glanced down at the stone platform, expecting an attack from Cain, something to distract her long enough for her hold to break, and for the peak of the mountain to be consumed. But instead of an attack, she saw something else.

Her mother had rematerialized and leapt through the air at Cain. The woman had her knives out and almost on the man, but he hadn't been so distracted as Karlona believed. He turned to her and laid hold of Karlona's neck with one hand, just as she came within striking range. Her obsidian daggers remained in her hands, and her mother slashed and stabbed at Cain in an attempt to free herself. Cain's hand tightened, and he laughed at Karlona.

"No!" Jak yelled, and her Telekinetic shield threatened to collapse. She strained with the effort of keeping it alive. She could let it go. If she leapt off of the mountain top, she could make it down to the platform to save her mother.

But could she? The future stretched out before her in one blinding flash. She could save her mother. At least temporarily. But what would happen then? They couldn't defeat Cain. Not like this. She could save her mother now only to die later, and what would that accomplish? Even with the second Pillar of Eternity destroyed, he would find the first one, and use it to ravish the land. Thousands, perhaps millions would die.

But if she stayed to protect the second Pillar of Eternity, perhaps she would find a way to use it. It was the faintest spark of hope, yet hope nonetheless.

No...was this...? She grit her teeth with the effort of sustaining her

shield under the constant barrage of dragon fire. This was a choice. It was a choice like the one she had faced in her second test. A choice between two correct options. Save her mother, or save the Pillar.

Seph and Marek were nowhere in sight. They had probably, wisely, taken shelter the moment Cain had arrived on the scene. Why couldn't her mother have done the same?

But if her mother hadn't intervened the first time, she would have died shortly after dropping the first Pillar of Eternity. And now, she kept Cain from launching an attack on Jak while she defended the mountaintop. She was making the hard choice. To sacrifice herself to save another, to choose the greater good over her own self-preservation.

"Please no," Jak whispered. There was no one to hear her, no one that *could* hear her over the roar of the dragon. Yet she knew that the second Pillar of Eternity, that white Relic of unknowable power, understood. "Please don't make me do this. Help me find another way."

Tears ran down her cheeks. Cain had Karlona in his grasp, and his eyes flashed a brighter blue as his fist closed around her throat. Karlona gasped, continuously stabbing at Cain with her daggers. When that didn't work, she called on her Fae magic to create a cloud of darkness around them, in an attempt to distract Cain, to obscure his vision. They both disappeared behind the veil of shadow. But the last-ditch attempt would likely not be enough to get the better of Cain. Sooner or later, his fist would close completely on Karlona's neck, and she would die.

She could save her mother. All she had to do was jump off the peak and let it be consumed by fire. But how many lives could she save if she could somehow take the Pillar away. If there was even a chance that she could eventually convince the Pillar to work for her, it could save countless lives. She could create Illadar, save the Fae, and punish Cain for everything he'd done.

Tears streamed down her face. "I'm sorry, mother."

Jak threw every ounce of strength she possessed into the telekinetic shield. The dragon, who hovered not far away, continued its barrage, but she did not back down. She screamed, closed her eyes, and hammered all her will power against the dragon's assault.

Ripple.

Silence surrounded her. She opened her eyes to see that white corridor, the same one she'd seen before, but this time there was something different. Someone was walking toward her, a woman. She had beautiful brown, flowing hair.

"I am so sorry, child." The woman's voice flowed around her, as if in an embrace.

Jak's eyes stung, but she faced the stranger with a head held high. Based on past experience, she knew who this woman was.

"You're Eve," she said. It was not a question. "Our ancestor, the companion of Adam."

The woman nodded. "I am, and I am so sorry for putting you through this."

"Really?" Jak said, still feeling the tear stains on her cheeks. "Are you really sorry?"

"Some of us come to Earth with a higher destiny, a greater responsibility."

Had there been somewhere to sit, Jak would have done so. Every part of her had been pushed to the point of exhaustion. "Well, I did it in the end, I made the hard choice. And now I've lost my only remaining family." The tears began to flow once again.

"Child," Eve stepped closer and raised a hand to brush the tears off of Jak's cheeks. "I know there is nothing I can say to make it better. Even the knowledge that we made the right decisions, that our sacrifices will benefit millions to come, even that is not enough."

She was right, it wasn't. So Jak said nothing.

"You have proven yourself heroic, Jak." Eve continued. "Very few could have done what you did. As such, I will grant unto you the power of space. It is the highest gift given to mortals, the highest we

are even capable of comprehending. Use it well.”

And before Jak could say any more, to ask what this power of space entailed, or maybe learn a clue that would point her to the third Pillar of Eternity, the room flooded with a bright light.

Ripple.

She was back on the mountain top, the dragon fire still raining down on her. Jak lay on her back, her shield still holding, though she knew it wouldn't for much longer. She couldn't see what was happening with Cain. But there was one crucial change to her situation.

The Pillar of Eternity, a white beam of high magic, sat comfortably in her hands.

Cain was laughing below, oblivious to what had just happened above him, oblivious to what Jak now held. The tool to their salvation, to the salvation of everyone.

She rose to her feet, staring at the polished white surface, the perfect inverse of the first Pillar of Eternity she had found. Different but in a way, soul mates, bound to each other.

She tapped it hard on the ground, willing its magic to activate, to discover what terrible, what wonderful secrets it had to unfold.

Time did not stand still, not as the other Pillar of Eternity had done. Instead, her mind became more...open. That was the only way she could describe it. An awareness, not unlike the link she established with the Fae, spread out from her. Complex arithmetic, letters, numbers, and more ran through her mind. She understood little, but she knew what she could do with it. The Pillar was guiding her thoughts, much as the first Pillar had done to help her understand its complexities. Her awareness of space...bent in on itself, folding, collapsing.

She winked out of existence on the top peak of the mountain, and instantly appeared several feet above, on top of the dragon!

She gasped, the strange sensation of being two places at once running through her before she caught her bearing, glancing around at where she had traveled.

The dragon stopped belting fire at the tip of the mountain, suddenly realizing that someone was on its back. Its head swung from side to side as if trying to get a good look at who straddled its back. Jak held on as the wings buffeted its body about, one way, than another. She was going to fall off if she didn't do something quick.

She focused on the Pillar. She had to try and use it again. The stream of numbers and letters reappeared, enveloped her, and she folded space in on itself once again, this time taking the dragon with her.

And suddenly they were several miles away, by a different

mountain peak. This power was incredible! There was no way she could have made that jump so fast, even with the power of time that came from the other Pillar.

The dragon stopped roaring, confused. Hopefully if she left it here, it wouldn't come back to attack them. But Jak had to get back and face Cain. She concentrated and...

Ripple.

She now stood on the stone platform, at the base of the stairs that led to where the Pillar of Eternity had once resided.

Cain stood facing away from her, and a dark corpse lay at his feet. Her mother.

A mixture of grief and anger rushed through her. "You killed her!" she yelled. He would pay, there would be blood!

Cain turned to her, surprise flickering over his mutilated face. Jak noted with a hint of satisfaction the slight widening of his eyes as they found the white Pillar in her hand. But she would not give him any more time to react.

Dimly aware of the staff guiding her, she tapped into its powers once again.

In the blink of an eye, she materialized next to Cain, grabbing him from behind and activating the Pillar of Eternity once more. The two of them rippled off the face of the mountain, leaving nothing but two scared humans and a pile of corpses in their wake.

Jak reappeared with Cain in tow, but this time they were miles away. She could not count how many, but it was as far away from the mountaintop as she could manage. Nothing but blue ocean spread out in front of her. But she didn't have much time to look as they began falling. The Pillar had brought them hundreds of feet above the ground, falling into an empty sea with no land in sight.

She let go of Cain, kicking him away and throwing a fireball at him for good measure. He blocked the fireball but the force of it propelled him further away from her. His face was a mix of shock and rage.

"You will soon pay!" he said as he tumbled away from her towards the depths below. "Enjoy your freedom while it lasts."

And before he could do or say anything more, Jak activated the Pillar and the earth rippled once again.

She found herself back on the top of Mt. Knot. Marek and Seph were there, gathering around one of the corpses. Marek nearly jumped when she materialized no more than ten feet away.

"What just happened?" said Seph. "We hid once Cain arrived and didn't see much after that. Karlona..." he trailed off and stared down at the ground.

Jak took several steps forward and knelt next to her mother's dead

body. Her eyes were open, but the green light that typified the Shadow Elves was gone. Her neck was bent at an unnatural angle, the clear cause of death.

Jak gasped out a sob. "This was too great a price," she cried aloud, though she wasn't talking to Seph and Marek.

She still held onto the white staff, the reason they had come all this way, and the reason Karlona was now dead. She had the second Pillar now, but she wanted nothing more than to throw it away after what it had required of her.

But she knew that would be foolish. If anything, the new Pillar was now more important. She couldn't let it go and make her sacrifice meaningless. She had to use it for good, to make her mother's death worth something. To save the lives of others.

She bent over her mother's body and sobbed, while Seph and Marek looked on. Jak hardly noticed the minutes go by, or the hours. Sky Fae returned, knowing the battle was over. They hovered around the fallen, their eyes somber, and their heads bowed.

In the hours that followed, they set about cleaning things up. The demons that remained alive had long fled, gone from the moment Jak had taken Cain away and dropped him in an ocean thousands of miles away. But there was still the bodies of the dead to deal with.

They built a cairn for Karlona first, a pile of stones built up at the exact peak of the mountain, where the white Pillar of Eternity had once stood, under a great stone archway. That seemed fitting, the body would be sheltered there, though it did nothing to replace the hole that now resided in Jak's heart. It took several hours, but Marek, Seph, and all the Sky Fae pitched in, each gathering a single rock and placing it on Karlona's body until she was completely covered.

She sat on the steps for some time after that. Seph neared and sat beside her, placing one arm around her shoulder. There was nothing he could say or do, but she was grateful to know he was there. After several minutes, she leaned her head against his shoulder. Perhaps this was the real reason he had been meant to come. Not to save them from the dragon on that ridge, but to be there for her when Karlona died. Had the Pillar known this would happen all along? Or was it someone else? What about this all-knowing God Seph kept talking about? Was He or She behind this?

But she did not get angry. Being angry at nothing would serve no one. She could so easily direct her anger at the Sky Fae, at the Pillar of Eternity, or at that ethereal God, if such a person even existed. But even she knew that doing so would not bring her mother back. What was past was past. She could only hope to create a future her mother would be proud of.

She stood, using the Pillar of Eternity for support. Seph, startled,

rose to his feet after her. His eyes radiated concern.

"I'm okay, Seph," she leaned forward and kissed him gently. "Thank you for being here. I was wrong to want you to stay at the camp."

"I wish I could have done more," he said and choked on the last word. Those were tears forming in his eyes.

Jak put the staff down and wrapped her arms around him. "I don't blame you."

"But maybe if I had chosen a brand like you said..." but Jak put one finger to his lips to quiet him.

"You can't let yourself go down that path. I know. That's what I thought after the day my father died. And yet if that day hadn't come, I would never have come this far. I'd be nothing but a student Gifter in the College of Skyecliff. The Fae would continue to be persecuted, and Cain would be unleashing his evil on the world. I would be powerless to stop it."

He returned the embrace, hugging her tightly against his chest. Jak closed her eyes and enjoyed the closeness of him, the warmth they shared together.

"What do we do now?" Seph asked.

"We leave," said Perchel, alighting near them, his wings adjusting to keep him balanced then folding up behind him. "We have given the word that every one of our number is to join yours in the valley you spoke of. It won't take us very long by air, though we won't be able to carry you the entire way."

Jak stared to the side where she had placed the Pillar of Eternity. "I think I have a decent idea of how to get there in a hurry."

Everyone pitched in to collect the dead demon bodies and pile them together on the large stone platform. Even though they couldn't afford the time to give these demons a proper burial, it was worth giving them some respect. Each one of these demons had been a person after all. Someone had loved them.

Marek pitched in without complaint, though he said little to Jak. He probably didn't know what to say. She had just lost her mother, and Seph was already there to comfort her. Jak drew closer to where he worked, picking up the body of a demon together and carrying it to the large pile.

"Are you okay?" he asked before she could say anything.

A flood of answers filled her mind. Of course she wasn't okay. Anyone could see that. And what kind of a question was that to ask anyway? She had just lost her mother! And in a way, Marek was responsible for all of this. They had only come to Mt. Knot because of what he said. If it hadn't been for him, her mother would never have died. Jak felt fury bubble within her, and she closed her eyes as she

fought it down.

Because, Marek had been right. The Pillar of Eternity had been exactly where he said it was. Whatever had happened with Marek had also set them on the correct path. Now she had the second Pillar of Eternity, and it would not be long before they recovered the first. She had only to find the third and everything could be set right.

She opened her mouth to reply to Marek, though not to answer his question, there were no good answers to that question. "I'd like to apologize for the way we've treated you before now. You were right all along," she said, holding the white Pillar in front of her. "It was here the whole time."

"You had no reason to trust me," he replied with a shrug. "I get it. It's like that one time when my parents caught us with sticky fingers. They thought we were getting into the jam."

Jak paused with her mouth open, a slow smile creeping onto her lips. "But we weren't getting into the jam, were we?"

Marek returned the smile. "Of course. Stealing honey is totally different."

Jak chuckled, "So you're saying when something looks suspicious..."

"It's easy to jump to the wrong conclusion," he finished.

"And how is stealing honey any better than stealing jam?"

Marek shrugged again with a smile. "It's not. But that doesn't mean they were right."

"Not the perfect analogy," Jak said, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Okay, maybe not. But it made sense in my head."

Jak nodded. "Well, at any rate, you've proven your point. And we recovered the second Pillar because of you. I won't doubt you again."

Marek nodded. "It's okay. Again, I understand why you didn't trust me completely. I'm honestly surprised we got this far."

"Well, perhaps I trusted you more than I realized," said Jak. "But I'm glad you came back. I still don't know how you survived, but I've seen and learned enough over the last few days to believe what you say."

He shook his head and stared away from the mountain, into darkness. "I wish I could tell you more. But I don't understand it myself. One minute I was dying. The next, I was somewhere else, months had passed, and I knew I needed to find you."

"It's a crazy story," Jak conceded. "But almost too crazy not to be true. And now we have the proof that we should have trusted you all along."

"So what does that mean?" he said.

"It means when we get back, I'll make sure you are welcome with us. You'll have a life, possibly even a seat on the council if I can



convince the others. Whatever strange connection you have, it worked this time, we may need it again.”

“I’m not even sure I have a special connection as you call it. In fact, a part of me feels like my responsibility is ended now that you have the Pillar of Eternity.”

“Do you not want to join us?”

“No, no, I do. It’s just I’m not sure what else I could contribute.”

Jak thought about it for a moment before saying, “at the very least I will be glad to have you there. After my father died, you’re all I have left of Riverbrook. And now with mother...”

She couldn’t finish the thought. But Marek understood. He reached out one hand to touch her shoulder. “I understand. I’ll try to be there for you even if for nothing more than moral support.”

Jak felt the tears welling up in her eyes again. She rubbed what she could away. “There’s one more thing, Marek.” she said, speaking hastily. “I know we never talked much about what you said to me shortly before the battle of Foothold, but...”

“It’s okay, Jak.” Marek put a hand on her shoulder. “I got past that. And I’m not going to intrude on anything you and Seph have.”

“Thank you.” Jak let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding. “I cared...care about you a lot, Marek. I’m sorry that I never realized...”

“It was a young boy’s dream. And I will admit there are times when I deeply admire what you’ve become. Perhaps in another life we could have had a relationship. But it worked out differently, and I do not regret what has happened.”

Jak nodded. Yes, in another life she might have been together with Marek. They had teased each other about it when they were several years younger, before either of them were capable of such feelings like love. At the time, she had been repulsed by the idea of marrying her best friend and living together in her father’s cottage long after he passed on from natural causes instead of at the jaws of a demon. What a life that would have been. There was definitely something attractive about the thought. But Marek was right again. Their lives had worked out differently. And she did not regret it either.

That thought surprised her. After everything, the death of both parents, the loss and return of Marek, and every hardship she and her friends had undertaken, she still didn’t regret the life she had. That was different. A few months ago, she might have said otherwise.

“I’m glad to have you back, Marek,” she said, getting back to her work. “When we join back up with the others, we’ll have to catch up. There’s so much that I haven’t told you.”

Marek smiled, a warm smile that spread over his face. “I’d like that.”

They continued working until all of the demon bodies were arranged in a single pile. Jak lit it with her Flamedancing brand, and they all stood for a while to watch the bodies burn, a beacon on the mountaintop.

Jak scanned the skies for the dragon. It hadn't taken it as far as she took Cain, but it must have lost interest in them. She could not see it anywhere on the horizon. Well that was one thing to check off. Perhaps in the future they could figure out what to do with it. Maybe Seph could figure out what his special connection with the dragon had meant.

When they were finished, Perchel gave a few orders to the others, who all began flying back to their aerie to begin preparations to leave.

"Perchel," she said. "I'd like you to come with me."

He paused and looked at her with his brow upturned. "We are going with you."

"You personally. You won't get there as fast as I can."

Perchel glanced at the Pillar of Eternity and understanding spread across his face. "Very well. Give me a moment to prepare."

Jak nodded, and Perchel flew off, speeding away towards the aerie.

Seph came nearer, so that he, Marek, and Jak all stood together. "So that thing will take us all...back to the others?" he said, gesturing at the white Pillar.

"I believe so, if it works anything like the other Pillar of Eternity," said Jak. "And that reminds me. I should probably retrieve that one before someone wanders off with it."

She moved off to the edge of the stone platform, finding the rock that she had hung from and the long, steep slope beneath. She peered over the edge, but could not see any sign of the first Pillar from where they stood.

"Give me a moment," she said to Seph and Marek, who had followed her and were looking down themselves.

She tapped the white Pillar of Eternity on the ground, instinctively calling forth its magic. That natural awareness spread through the

space around her, like a web extending in all directions that hung onto every rock, every tree. Below her, far below, she felt something, like a magical signature that called to its mate.

In the blink of an eye, she was no longer on the mountain top, but beneath. She materialized onto a snow bank and slid forward somewhat before she could catch her footing. But a brief glance at her surroundings told her that the white Pillar, the power of space, had led her to the right place.

The first Pillar, the power of time, lay a few feet in front of her, stuck point downward in the snow. She waded through the elements until she was close enough to wrap her fingers around its cold, black surface.

Almost at once she felt something, a wave of euphoria rushing through her. The Pillars recognized each other. They were complete. She was complete, as she wielded their dual power. They could do a lot on their own, but that was nothing compared to what they could do together.

Where had that thought come from? She knew little about the Pillars, so she didn't want to assume more than she knew. But something, an instinct, told her that she now held more power than any mortal being had ever wielded since their creation. Why had her ancestors even devised such power? And what about the third Pillar of Eternity? What were its capabilities, and why did she feel like everything was already complete? Was there even more to come?

She pushed her thoughts aside. She had to get back to the mountain top to take the rest back to the valley.

Seph and Marek nearly stumbled at their surprise when she appeared right next to them.

"That's going to take some getting used to," said Seph. "I see you found the first Pillar."

Marek stared at the two staffs with interest. "So does the second Pillar allow you to move even faster than the first? Is that why we can't see you move?"

"No, not exactly," Jak scrunched up her face. "I'm honestly not sure how it works. She...it described itself as the power of space. And when I use its power, I can sort of fold space to instantly disappear and reappear some distance away."

"Can it go anywhere?" Marek asked, bending to further examine the Pillars. "As far as the other side of the planet perhaps?"

Jak didn't have an answer, though she had taken Cain a very great distance before she dropped him into the ocean. "Perhaps it can. I'm not really sure."

"Imagine what this could do for us," said Marek, rising and lifting his eyebrows in wonderment. "Communication, travel, knowledge.

This could revolutionize everything we know about the world.”

She narrowed her eyes at him and smiled. “Since when did you become an academic. You’re sounding more like me.”

He shrugged, “I guess I’m just excited that you managed to retrieve it after all.”

“It is certainly wondrous.” Seph said. “I wonder, if it could go anywhere on this Earth, could it perhaps go farther?”

Jak frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, if it can go anywhere, perhaps it could take us to the stars. Many have long theorized that there may be other worlds like ours.”

Jak paused. Cain had once told her of such things. She thought back to his words in Mt. Harafast. He had told her of the Pillars, of what they could do. He wanted to dominate worlds, to even create them, and rule over them. At the time, he had been trying to convince her to join him, though that sentiment was long past.

“Perhaps it can,” said Jak in wonder, staring at the Pillar with a new light. Just how powerful were they? “I think we should be careful in testing their abilities for now. Perhaps once we reach the others I can link with Yewin. That should help me understand these things.”

“A very sensible idea,” said Marek. “When do we leave?”

“As soon as Perchel gets back. I want him to represent his people in front of the council.”

They both nodded and said no more for the time being. Instead they sat on the stone steps and waited for the Sky Fae to return. Jak climbed the stairs to bid one final farewell to her mother. She was no longer crying. She had long ago accepted her father’s death, and in a way this was no different. She hadn’t even known her mother for very long, yet in that short amount of time she had grown as close to her as to any person. Their early connection had been the basis for her trusting the Fae in the first place. Everything she had done was ultimately a result of Karlona.

“I love you, mother.” she said in a whisper, staring down at the stone monument erected in the woman’s honor. “I’m sorry I couldn’t save you. But I will try to honor your legacy, and save lives where I can.”

A soft brush of wind caressed her face, and she closed her eyes. “And may I one day join you in peace, after all I can do.”

She did not want to die, both for her own sake and for the sake of those she protected and cared about. But when it came time for her to die, she would welcome it, assuming she had completed her work for the Fae. Everything Seph preached about Illadar, and a place of peace, she would build that for them if it killed her. Of that much, she was now certain.

With one final, longing stare at Karlona’s final resting place, Jak

turned and headed back down the stairs.

The sun was beginning to light the sky to the east. Perchel arrived just as she reached the platform below, carrying a pouch with some supplies. "I am ready," he said as she approached.

"Very well," she said, in a tone of voice that sounded stronger than she felt. "Let's be gone."

She reached both arms outward, holding the Pillars of Eternity in both hands, twin beacons of time and space, of light and darkness. Marek, Seph, and Perchel, each put one hand on an outstretched arm, connecting themselves to her and her magic. She stretched out her newfound awareness, letting it cover the land in search of the Fae, of her people.

Then in a flash of power, she moved them from that place.



IN THE VERY NEXT MOMENT, the four of them blinked into existence along a narrow path through a beautiful grove of aspen trees. The morning sun streamed through the fall leaves, casting a golden, yellow hue on the area around them. A small stream ran down to their right, but it was not large, not large enough for a Water Fae to navigate at least.

But what Jak noticed first was the crowd of people ahead of them. There were dwarves, gnomes, elves, humans, and wagons presumably carrying the Water Fae as well as provisions. No one turned to look at them, but they weren't moving forward either.

Jak took a deep breath and began walking forward. The others followed, with Perchel hovering in the air above her.

The others did not realize she was there until she began pushing through them. But as soon as they realized who it was, a path began to form ahead of her as Fae and humans alike made way. She did not have to say anything, and they did not say anything back, though a few expressed words of astonishment at seeing Perchel, a new kind of Fae. Yet most had their eyes on the two staffs that Jak carried, one black, one white.

She continued forward, through the crowd and the aspen trees. Why wasn't everyone still moving ahead? Were they on some kind of break?

Finally, she saw Skellig ahead of her. Someone must have rushed ahead to tell the major of Jak's coming, because she was already stepping forward to greet her. Gabriel, Yewin, and a handful of others were close behind.

"You're back," Skellig said as they approached each other. Her

eyes found the two Pillars in Jak's hand. Breathlessly, she added, "and you found it."

Jak nodded, "Marek was right. And I believe we can trust him. I hope you'll give him that chance."

She didn't look back to see Marek's expression, but she could hear him shifting his feet. Hopefully he would stay worthy of her endorsement.

"Incredible," said Gabriel, though Jak wasn't certain if he was talking about Marek's mysterious circumstances, or about the Pillar of Eternity. From the way he was staring at the staffs in her hand, he must be referring to the latter.

"Your arrival could not be better timed," said Skellig, putting forth one hand and guiding Jak forward. Jak followed the gesture and they proceeded forward together. "The valley is just up ahead."

"Why were you all waiting back here?" Jak asked, "I'm sure many of the Water Fae, not to mention everyone else, are eager for a place to relax."

"Yes, well there's a problem," replied Skellig. "You see, there are already people in the valley."

Jak stopped and turned to look at the major. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. There are people, a lot of them, already camped in the valley. They've been there for some time from what we can tell. Remember how I told you we would need to erect a fortress to protect the valley from demons or the queen's armies?"

Jak nodded.

"Well, they've already done just that. We can't get by."

"Are they hostile?"

"Not as far as we can tell. We've already had words with some of them, and they say they know you. We don't dare go in further in case it's an ambush. But they've done nothing to attack or antagonize us."

Jak's eyebrows furrowed. They knew her? How could anyone who knew her already be there? Almost everyone she knew was here, in their little army. The only exception was Naem, who was busy recruiting people in Skyecliff. And there was no way any of his recruits could have made it here before they did.

"Take me to them," she said, tightening her grip on the two Pillars. If this was a trap, she might need to use them in a hurry.

Skellig nodded and led her forward about a half mile before Jak caught sight of the fortresses protecting the entrance to the valley. It was no more than a simple wall with a battlement at the top, and a wooden gate leading from one side to the other. A small grate allowed for the stream to pass through. It was not large, as the pathway narrowed quite a bit so as to make an elaborate defense unnecessary.

Several people stood on top of the battlement, and they leaned

over the edges as Skellig approached with Jak in tow. Not exactly the kind of behavior one would expect from a defendant. Though the next thing Jak noticed was that the men, and a few women, had varying skin colors. Some were dark like those she had seen during her vision of the southern kingdoms, and others looked like they could have been from the eastern kingdoms, Seph's homeland. What were they all doing here?

There was a muttering among those along the wall, and a few left, presumably to inform someone that they were coming. At the same time, the large wooden door swung open, inviting them in.

Skellig hesitated, but Jak put one reassuring hand on her shoulder. "You said these people have shown no signs of hostility?"

"None whatsoever, but we couldn't just enter the valley without further proof."

"That is good. I think I will see what they have to say."

"I would advise against going in there," Skellig cautioned.

"It's okay, Skellig." Jak brought both Pillars of Eternity to bear. "They could not keep me captive if they tried."

She stepped forward, staring up at the men and women gazing back down at her from the battlement. Then she stepped through the door.

The view from the other side was something out of a dream. The valley was enormous, extending for miles in every direction. A lake lay directly in front of her, and pastures ideal for grazing surrounded it. In fact, there *were* sheep grazing on those fields. Had these people lived here for so long that they had settled down? That had to be the only explanation. The valley must have been inhabited for a long time. Gabriel had been mistaken about it being empty.

"You are Jak?" said a heavily accented voice to one side. She turned to see a man from the southern kingdoms climbing down the wall via several stone steps.

"I am," said Jak. "How do you know me?"

"We have been waiting for you a long time. Your companions would not believe us. They said they had to wait for you to return to them."

"Well I'm here, what do you have to say?"

"I am to take you to the Triad, our leaders. They will explain."

Jak hesitated, but ultimately did as the man said as he began walking away and waved at her to follow.

The journey wasn't far. The man led her past a small hill to a camp beyond. No, Jak realized with astonishment. This wasn't a camp, it was a full town. There was a main road that led through wooden homes and what looked like small trading posts.

The huts weren't elaborate but far more robust than Jak would have expected from an army or other temporary camp. These people had been here for a long while.

The man finally led her to one of the larger buildings. He gestured that she should wait inside while he entered, presumably, to announce her arrival.

When he returned, he stepped aside and waved one hand towards the doorway with a slight bow. He wanted her to enter.

She swallowed, tightening her grip on the Pillars of Eternity. If this was a trap, hopefully she could avoid it long enough to use her magic to escape.



She stepped inside, the wooden floor creaking as she entered the place.

Inside, she found a room, mostly empty save for a round table in the center. Around that table sat three persons, one an elderly man from the southern kingdoms based on his dark skin and strange garb, a middle-aged woman from the eastern kingdoms, and one other tall man with large blonde dreadlocks and a beard. He looked similar to her own people, though his clothing was of a style she did not recognize, with far more purple than she was used to seeing.

"It's you," said the dark-skinned man, rising from his chair. He gazed at her in wonder, and the others rose to their feet as well.

"Yes, I would never forget that red lock of hair," said the blonde man.

"We are honored," said the woman, with a slight bow. There was something familiar about her, but she couldn't place it. She did not recognize the others, though the dark one...

"I know you from somewhere?" she said, narrowing her eyes at the man.

He smiled and nodded, "I am Mosaial. I was the slave you saved many years ago."

"Mosaial?" she said. "But...but Mosaial was young, far younger than you. I killed your master only a matter of days ago."

"For me much time has passed," he said, though he seemed unsurprised by that fact.

"Do you remember me?" said the woman.

Jak turned to regard her. Now that she was thinking about it, the woman did look familiar.

"You're Li!" she exclaimed. "I met you in the eastern kingdoms."

Li nodded with a smile, "I did not trust you then, especially after Chiang met his end, but your actions created a lasting effect that has all but freed my people. We are grateful for what you did that day. You allowed us to live on."

"But how is this possible? It was only a few days ago." Jak stared around at all three of them.

The tall, blonde man answered. "Not for us. For some of us it was a lifetime ago."

Of course. The visions had brought her to see a younger Yewin after all, not to mention visions of her father and mother. Her interactions with the three in front of her must have taken place in the past. Though of the three, the tall man was the only one she did not recognize.

He smiled, noting her confusion. "I was the boy you found in the woods many years ago. Bretton."

Jak's eyes widened, and she suddenly had the urge to sit down. A

fourth chair at the table would do. She collapsed, still in a daze. "I thought I had left you to die." Her eyes began to sting at the memory.

"I nearly did," he said as the three of them returned to their seats. "I wandered in those woods for three days before I found something to eat. I was half frozen but I finally came across a lost adolescent deer in the same predicament I was. His death was my salvation."

"And look at you now." Jak said, appreciatively. The man looked as strong as a pair of horses.

"Those days were my rock bottom, but it gave me the foundation to launch myself to a higher destiny. There are many that follow me now, and I would pass them on to you. We are here to join your cause."

"All of you?" Jak glanced at the other two. "How did you even know to come here?"

"You told me about this place, remember?" said Mosaial. "I knew I would come here the moment I could. But there were others of my people that needed freeing. I did what I could for them first, then brought them here."

Li spoke next. "I came after bringing stability to my people. We established a new ruler, a queen, who gave us our freedoms, and created strong alliances with the surrounding nations. Her son even came here to live."

Jak gave a slight smile. "That would be Seph. I'm sure he would love to meet you."

"He is here? We would indeed welcome the opportunity. I personally escorted him here many years ago. Is he well?"

"He is, though his time with our queen was not everything we could have wished."

Li nodded slightly before continuing. "In any case, after some time I decided to bring those who would follow me here, to find you. Most of those who saw you have come."

"But you haven't exactly answered my question. I told Mosaial about this place, but I never mentioned it to the rest of you."

"We were both visited by a messenger," said Bretton. "A woman in white. She told us where to find you, and explained that when we saw you again, only a few days would have passed for you."

That explained why none of them seemed overly surprised to see that she was still a young girl of eighteen.

She took a deep breath. This was a lot to take in all at once. That was the second time she'd heard of this woman in white. She had been the one to tell Seph about the book of Illadar, and she had guided these people here. Who was this woman? Could it have been Eve, the same woman Jak had seen while using the Pillar of Eternity? Or was Eve just a memory tied to the Relic.

“How many are with you?” she asked after some time to process.

“Nearly seven thousand,” said Bretton.

Jak almost fell out of her chair. “Seven thousand!” They didn’t even have five hundred in her own band. How would they manage seven thousand? Was the valley even big enough for that?

“It is alright,” said Li. “We have already prepared stores of food and tilled the valley for harvesting. There are plenty of resources to last for winter.”

“Did you bring all of that with you?” asked Jak. Though now that she thought about it, she changed the question. “How long have you been here?”

“Three years,” said Bretton. “We knew it may be some time before you met us here.”

Three years. Three years ago she had still been a young teenager herding sheep with her father. Had the Pillars of Eternity, or whatever determined her destiny, already known what she would become?

“We understand it is a lot to process,” said Li. “But we are ready and willing to help, as needed.”

“I should warn you,” said Jak. “You may or may not have heard about the Fae. But there are some humans that are predisposed to become them. If too many of your people get close to a powerful Relic like these—” She brandished the Pillars of Eternity. “—then I don’t know what might happen. Some of them might change.”

Mosaial nodded, “We are aware of this, and we have seen some of your Fae with our own eyes. We are prepared for such an eventuality. Some are even hoping for it.”

Jak frowned. “Why?” she asked. She knew many of the Fae were content with their change after the fact, but most humans did not like the idea. It was a new idea, and most did not welcome such dramatic change.

“We do not have many of the abilities that your people enjoy,” said Li. “The Fae you speak of have even greater abilities than most of your people. We welcome such an opportunity.”

Jak stood up, faced each one of them, and a smile split her face. “If that’s the case, we would love to join you.” She reached forth her hands to grasp those of each of them in turn. Seven thousand people. With that many they could stop anyone from entering the valley. They could find peace. This could be Illadar after all.

Jak returned in a hurry to the main gate to reassure Skellig that everything was alright, promising to explain the long story later.

Together, she and the major led everyone inside, where they were welcomed with open arms by Bretton, Li, Mosaial, and their company.

One by one, all of Jak’s companions entered the valley. Seph, Marek, Gabriel, and what remained of the Bright Elves, Shadow Elves,

Water Fae, gnomes, dwarves, trolls, and even the Sky Fae with Perchel who quickly found Jak when he flew in.

"I told you your actions would have lasting consequences," he said as he landed a few feet away from her, looking from her to the three leaders of the valley's occupants. The three of them stared back at the Sky Fae, a mixture of awe and surprise on their faces.

"Don't tell me you knew this would happen?" Jak folded her arms as she spoke. "Because you could have warned me."

"I knew only what the Pillar of Eternity allowed me to know. I knew your actions in the test would have an impact on future events. It appears they had more to do with your direct future than even I realized." He gave a slight bow to Li, Mosaial, and Bretton, who returned the gesture with a nod of their heads.

"We have heard of the many Fae before," said Li, speaking to both Perchel and Jak. "But we are honored to receive so many. What a wondrous people you are."

"I only wish the rest of the world saw it that way," Jak said. "I can't say how grateful we are that you would just let us join you here."

"It is what we have been preparing for," said Mosaial. "We have cabins prepared for as many as we can hold, and enough food for all of us to survive the coming winter."

"We can't possibly repay you for your kindness."

Mosaial shook his head. "Jak, it is we who are repaying you. Your help, though small, proved to be our salvation, for all of us."

"She is that, indeed," said Yewin, approaching them with Marek and all of the other members of the council following close behind. All except the Water Fae of course, who were probably being carried in their pitch-coated wagons to the nearby lake. Yewin bowed to Li, Mosaial, and Bretton on his approach. "My name is Yewin, I represent the Bright Elves and these are the other representatives of human and Fae alike." He waved a hand at the other members of the council. "We are eager to hear your story, though I think I might already have an idea of what happened." He glanced at Jak.

"You remember, don't you?" Jak said slowly, not taking her eyes away from Yewin. "The day you changed."

Yewin nodded. "How could I forget?"

"But you told me that the change was spontaneous, that you didn't know what caused it."

"I told you only what you needed to know at the time. It wasn't my place to say more until you had experienced it for yourself. Why do you think I was so willing to help and learn more of you when we first met? Or why I traveled with Skellig to Mt. Harafast when I heard that there might be a Pillar of Eternity buried there?"

“But weren’t you terrified after what happened?”

“At first, but you’re forgetting our nature, Jak. We understand truth when we see it. And truth will rule out fear anytime.”

Gabriel folded his arms. “Clearly something happened that the rest of us are in the dark on. You’ll have to fill us all in later. But I should first ask about Karlona. Where is she?”

Jak’s face fell, and she saw her expression mirrored on the faces of Seph, Marek and Perchel. Gabriel’s eyes widened as he and the rest of the council understood.

“Oh Jak,” said Yewin. “I’m so sorry.”

Jak stared at the ground. “She died fighting Cain. He almost stopped me from taking this,” she held up the second Pillar of Eternity for all to see. She didn’t tell them of the choice she had been forced to make, between saving the Pillar of Eternity or her mother.

Gabriel probed further. “And Cain, is he...”

“He’s still alive,” said Jak. “Though I sent him far away. Long story. But I’m sure he will be returning as fast as he is capable.”

“Then we’d better prepare our defenses as best we can,” said Skellig. “Let Karlona be the last of us that he slaughters.”

“I’m not sure we could stop him,” said Jak. “The Pillars give me great power, yes, but they do not allow me to kill, not even him. All I can do is delay him. But in terms of sheer power, not even I can stand up to him.”

“Then what can we do?” said Li, who had been listening intently with the others. “We were warned that there would be enemies, but this Cain of yours sounds beyond our power, based on your description.”

Jak turned to Skellig. “Begin your preparations. We should be ready for him or the queen or whoever decides to attack us here.” She looked at the rest of them. “But we’ll need more than that. Some kind of plan. I’ll admit I don’t know what else to do.”

“I do.” It was Marek who spoke, stepping out from behind Gabriel. “Or at least, I have an idea.”

Jak met Marek’s eyes. His advice had worked before. “Let’s hear it.”

“**Y**ou cannot use the Pillars as a weapon,” Marek began. “But

you have them, and you have them for a reason. They should be used.”

“Go on,” Jak prodded.

“Perhaps if you could use their power to create a place where Cain cannot touch us. Where everyone could live in peace. Like this Illadar that Seph told me about.” He glanced back at Seph, who was nodding his head in thought.

“And what about finding the third Pillar?” said Gabriel. “Perhaps its power would allow you to fight Cain, or at least make him less of a threat.”

Jak nodded, “Yes, I believe Illadar will remain outside of our reach until we can get that third Pillar.”

“We may have found Illadar already,” offered Seph. “This valley is big, it is fertile, and defensible. What better place to find peace.”

Jak thought it through. “Perhaps. But our defenses won’t stop Cain, and we can’t assume that we will remain here forever. Sooner or later our numbers will grow, and we will need to expand beyond this valley.”

“So you’re suggesting Illadar is a much larger place than this?” asked Gabriel. “Perhaps the size of a whole nation?”

“Maybe,” said Jak. “Or perhaps it’s not a place at all. Perhaps it’s the idea of peace, a bridge between us and those that fear us.”

“Well, you can’t just ignore the Pillars of Eternity,” said Marek. “They’re supposed to help you find this Illadar, right?” He looked around at the others. Seph and Yewin were nodding.

“No one is arguing with you about that,” said Jak. “I will do what I can to learn more about them, and their purpose. They have both communicated with me before so I know at some level they are capable of teaching me something. Perhaps I can get some answers.”

Bretton spoke next. “I suggest that in the meantime we help everyone get settled. I’m sure there are many in need of food and rest.”

“Indeed,” said Skellig. “That should be our first priority if there are no immediate threats from Cain or elsewhere,” she glanced at Jak, who shook her head.

“Very well,” said Li. “The three of us will help you coordinate.”

They began discussing next steps with Skellig and Gabriel, and Jak let them sort out the details. Instead, she peeled off from the rest of them, with a soft motion at Marek and Seph that indicated she did not want them to follow.

There was one person that she could always talk to at times like this, well, besides her mother. But since she was dead, that left only Amelia.

She followed the wagons that were still being led to the lake, where one by one, the Water Fae were released with a splash.

When she finally found her friend doing somersaults in the freshwater, she sat on the side of the lake and smiled.

“I imagine those wagons were kind of confining,” she said after Amelia spotted her and drew closer.

“Oh you have no idea, Jak. It’s maddening when you’re one of us, not being able to move. I honestly don’t know how I stayed still for so long in our classes before my change. Being in water requires movement. By the way, I’m so glad you’re back. How was the trip? Is that the Pillar of Eternity?” She pointed at the two staffs lying next to Jak on the grass.

“It is,” Jak said, glancing down at the white and black Pillars. “It came with a cost though.”

She caught Amelia up on what happened, glancing over the details but mentioning the Sky Fae, Cain, her tests and their results, and most importantly what happened to her mother. Amelia’s face fell as she heard the news.

“Oh Jak,” she said. “Oh Jak. And after barely finding her. I can’t imagine what that would be like.”

“Where are your parents, Amelia?” Jak asked, not wanting to dwell any longer on Karlona. “Weren’t they in Tradehall or someplace?”

Amelia’s face split between a mixture of anxiety and chagrin, “Yes, but I don’t think they know anything of what’s happened. They left me with grandfather Gabriel and didn’t expect me to return until I graduated. But I suppose they probably heard about the demon attack on Skyecliff. If they tried to reach Gabriel they would have found out he’s not there anymore. Oh I hope they haven’t heard anything.”

Jak seriously doubted that. Word traveled fast between Tradehall and Skyecliff. Someone would have looked into Amelia’s disappearance by now. Perhaps at some point, she would have to find Amelia’s parents and bring them here. Maybe Naem would find them in his recruiting and tell them what happened to their daughter.

“And even with all that, and everything that’s happened to you, you wouldn’t go back to the way things were?”

Amelia shook her head. “I was born to be a Water Fae, Jak. I know it. I was never complete until I gained a fin and entered the ocean. And this lake is almost better. It’s not as big as the ocean but freshwater is simply more enjoyable I think.”

“And what if we couldn’t stay here?” Jak asked. “What if we have to keep moving even after all we’ve been through?”

“Then we keep moving until we find Illadar.” Amelia replied without hesitation. “Besides, it will have to happen eventually. You don’t expect us to live in a single lake forever, do you?”

“I suppose not,” said Jak, wrapping her arms around her knees. “I just feel like I’m meant to do something. But I don’t know what.”

“Well, why not try the link?” Amelia offered.

“What do you mean?”

“The link with Yewin. You can do it safely now, with the help of the trolls, right?”

Jak thought on that. Yes, it might be a good idea to try the link again. She had thought as much back when she was on Mt. Knot, but had forgotten once she arrived in the valley.

She’d never linked with Yewin before to ask a specific question. But maybe it was worth a try. Amelia was right that the link was far less risky now that they had the trolls to provide a well of energy to draw from. The link drained its participants of their life energy, and the trolls seemed to be the only way to stop that from killing them.

She stood. “Amelia, thanks again for helping me clear my head.”

“My pleasure, though you should probably get that looked at,” Amelia winked at Jak.

Jak smiled and turned to survey the land around her. The lake stretched on for miles, nearly to the other end of the valley. Irrigated land lay in neat rows on one side, while grazing land made up the other half, dotted with the white forms of sheep. Three years Li, Mosaial, and Bretton had been here, preparing for her arrival. Yes, that could not just be for chance. She was meant to do something here, that much was certain. And with two Pillars of Eternity, perhaps she was capable of doing it. But what about that third Pillar? Where did it lie, and what magic did it possess?

“This is a great place, isn’t it?” Amelia said, following Jak’s gaze at the surrounding valley.

“It is,” Jak replied. “But something tells me it’s not to last.”

“What do you mean? You don’t think the people that were already here will kick us out, do you?” Amelia said, frowning.

“No, they’re not the problem. Cain is. Or the queen. I don’t know, it’s just a feeling so I wouldn’t worry about it. I’m going to ask Yewin



for a link and see what I can figure out.”

“You do that. And make sure to drop by more often. We don’t talk enough.”

That much was true. “I’ll definitely try to visit as much as I can,” Jak agreed. Then she left, allowing Amelia to continue exploring the lake with the other Water Fae.

She didn’t go back to Yewin right away. Instead, she wandered off through the grazing land and up a large hill, letting the familiar smell of sheep and pasture bring her back to simpler days. Most of the sheep ran away at her approach, but she didn’t mind. She just needed some time to clear her head. It wasn’t until she saw a large rocky body to one side that she realized that the sheep weren’t just scared of her.

It was the large troll she had met just weeks before in Riverbrook, the one she had named Rael after her father. In some ways, he had behaved a lot like her father on that occasion, quiet and resolute. The troll’s body could easily be mistaken for a misshapen boulder, and bits of lightning-like energy lit its eyes and sparked across its body. Somehow the trolls were the embodiment of living energy, which was what made them so important as a sort of fuel during a link.

“And what do you think of this place?” she asked as she drew near.

The troll didn’t say anything, which was typical. Instead it sat with a booming crunch that caused the nearest sheep to scamper and bleat in protest. The troll simply sat and looked out across the valley. The communication was clear.

“Yes, it is beautiful,” she said, coming to rest beside the troll. She thought about sitting down too, but found it unnecessary. Even sitting, the troll was still taller than she was standing. So she put one arm on the troll’s rocky carapace and enjoyed the moment for a while. A cool wind whipped lazily at her hair, and they spent some time listening to birdsong. Too bad these moments couldn’t last.

“I’m going to need you soon,” she said.

The troll turned its massive head to face her, those purple eyes regarding her.

“I need to link with Yewin again, to discover what more we need to do here, to defeat Cain or find Illadar. Has anyone told you about Illadar?”

The troll hesitated but gave a brief nod of its head.

“I think I’m supposed to find it, using these.” She showed him the two Pillars of Eternity. “But I need to know more.”

The troll raised one arm, pointing out at the valley. His meaning was clear.

“No, I don’t think this is Illadar. I mean, it could be, but some things just don’t fall into place.”

The troll lowered its arm and opened its mouth to breathe out a

single word. “LLLLOST”

“Yes, that’s right,” she confirmed. “As long as Cain can find us here, or others still want to hurt us, we will still be lost. I need your help and Yewin’s to know what to do next.”

With a rocky crack of joints, the troll raised itself back onto its feet, staring down at her for a moment, then heading off back down the hill towards the cabins below.

Jak followed. She had rarely felt as thoughtful as she did now. Maybe it was just a result of losing her mother, or of all the tests the Pillar of Eternity had somehow put her through. But something about this valley did not feel like home. Instinctively, she knew there was more to come.

A corner of her mind reached out to try and find Cain. But whatever connection she had with him had seemingly vanished. She felt no headache, and there was no sickening feeling in the pit of her stomach to suggest that he was near. She wasn’t completely sure where she had dropped him, but she knew it would take him days to return, even if he flew through the air at his fastest rate. Yet why was it that she felt so threatened by him right now? It was like she couldn’t enjoy the luxuries of this valley while she knew he was still out there. Like none of it would even matter until he was no longer a threat.

She followed Rael the troll until she came back to the cabins on the south side of the valley, where she had met with the leaders of those who had already gathered here.

Those that had already been in the valley for a while were helping the Fae and other newcomers to get settled. Jak saw them carrying belongings and other supplies into various cabins or large tents. Many gave the troll a startled look, quickly stepping out of his way, but most appeared curious, even in awe of his enormous bulk. Many eyes met hers as well, and she could see from the reverent way they nodded at her that they knew who she was as well.

The people went back to their work as Jak and the troll trudged along the dirt street that ran through the small town. The troll’s head waved from side to side, looking undoubtedly for Yewin.

It didn’t take them long to find the Bright Elf. He still talked with Li and the others, even though most of his people and the other members of the council had wandered off to help their respective groups settle. They stood near one of the cabins at the end of the street, near where Jak had first met with the Triad. All of them stopped their conversation as they noticed the giant troll approaching.

“Jak,” Yewin said, as he spotted her next to the troll. “These three were just telling me their side of the story. It seems the power of the second Pillar kept you busy on that mountain. I can’t wait to learn

more. If it can send you back in time like it did for us..."

"Perhaps later," Jak said, coming level with the troll. "But I wanted to talk to you about something first."

"Of course." Yewin gave a brief farewell to the others, who nodded at Jak and returned to their own duties. "What is it?"

Jak glanced around at the many people surrounding them. "Perhaps it would be better if we took this away from the crowds."

Yewin didn't object, so Jak led them all away from the main road, back up the hill that she and the troll had come from. When they were safely out of earshot of any creature on two legs, Jak turned to face both Yewin and the troll.

"I'd like to link with both of you again. I know it's still a risky business, but we have Rael and the trolls now to help. Their energy gives you more of a chance. And I can't shake the feeling that there's more I must do. I need answers."

Yewin did not hesitate. "If you need me to link with you, I am ready to do so. I'm honestly surprised that you did not ask earlier. After what you achieved on the plains outside Riverbrook..."

"I think that experience scared me. It was almost too much responsibility and power. But after what I've been through on Mt. Knot, and going back in time, I think I can handle this."

Yewin nodded. "I assume you'd like to do it here?"

Jak glanced at the troll, who met her gaze with steady eyes. "I would, if both of you are willing."

In answer, Yewin stepped forward and took the Pillars of Eternity from her hands, placing them gently on the ground to one side, then taking both of her hands in his own. He took a deep breath and waited for the troll, who stepped behind Jak and put his massive arms on her shoulders, just as he'd done on the battlefield.

Then energy burst into her, out of her, all around her. It was an exhilarating experience, but one that she was ready for. Rael had established his link. A second later, she felt a rush of knowledge enter her, like a library of truth that was so vast it could not be sorted, counted, or understood. There was so much of it that it became hard to focus on any one thing.

But this time she had questions. Before she had acted on instinct, and the well of knowledge had responded as such. Now, she had to be more direct.

*Where is the third Pillar of Eternity?*

Jak let the question float through her mind, guiding it to find the answers in that sea of truth brought on by her link with Yewin. She knew the answer was out there somewhere, and that it was exactly what she needed. Illadar would not happen without the third Pillar. Of that much she was certain. All the legends spoke of three Pillars, even the Book of Illadar.

Perhaps the reason she couldn't kill Cain using the Pillars was because they were incomplete without their third companion. Or perhaps there was simply some magic of creation in the third Pillar that was required to form Illadar. Even now, connected as she was to Yewin and Rael, she could tell that there was some truth to this. The three Pillars would be used to create Illadar. And there was even a hint of what Illadar would be. She probed further.

A bead of truth floated towards her, like a single star separating itself from a sea of its brethren and coming to meet her. It grew larger and larger in her subconsciousness. The answers were there, she just knew it. Answers to the nature of Illadar, the location of the third Pillar of Eternity, and the secret to defeating Cain.

She was only dimly aware of a flash of light from the real world, coming from the two Pillars of Eternity that lay on the ground. The runes on their polished white and black shafts were beginning to glow. But Jak only barely noticed, because the bead of truth was coming closer. It was almost upon her.

Then everything around her vanished to a familiar and brilliant shade of white.

Yewin was no longer there, or perhaps she was no longer with Yewin. But she recognized her location as a white hallway that she had visited many times before in her visions. Was this some other kind of test? What had happened to Yewin and Rael? Was all this in her head, and her body was still with them?

"Oh good, you're here," said a voice behind her.

She turned to see a woman about Jak's age with shoulder-length, golden hair, standing only a few paces behind her. She narrowed her

eyes at the newcomer. She'd never seen this person before. She did not look like Eve, who she had met upon taking the second Pillar of Eternity. And she was dressed in a fashion far beyond anything she was used to. The woman was dressed all in white, even sporting a cape, which seemed to blend in with the white corridor behind her. She also bore a circular, golden symbol emblazoned on her chest, and strange boots and gloves that were red.

"I'm so glad you made it," said the blonde woman. "I mean, we knew you would eventually, but it's so good to see things go right for once."

"You're the woman in white," Jak said, the realization hitting her a moment before she said it. "You showed Seph how to find the Book of Illadar, and you guided Li, Mosaial, and Bretton to the valley."

The woman gave her a small salute. "You got it!" she said in a cheery voice. She reminded Jak a little bit of Amelia, always excited. "I must say, I have so been looking forward to meeting you. You're a bit of a legend where I come from. But I shouldn't give too much of that away. Sorry, spoilers." She chuckled.

Jak narrowed her eyes even further. What a strange thing to say. She had never met this woman or anyone like her in her life. Had she been another person saved by some actions Jak had performed in the past, like Bretton? But then why was she here in this white corridor that had something to do with the magic of the Pillars? And what had happened to Yewin and Rael?

"Why am I here?" she asked the woman. "I was just about to ask some questions through the link with Yewin."

"Yes, you asked for truth. And the magic brought you to me. I happen to be somewhat of a collector of truth." The woman flashed a smile at Jak, who returned it hesitantly.

"So can you tell me where to find the third Pillar of Eternity?" Jak asked.

"I can help you find the answer."

Jak's brow furrowed. "I don't need any more tests."

The girl's smile faltered and she looked down at the ground. When she faced Jak, her face bore a slightly more serious expression. "I'm afraid your time with tests is not over. You still have many left to face, and some of them will be hard. Very hard." Her face held an expression Jak did not expect coming from a perky girl like this: pity. But as soon as it appeared, it was gone. "But this is not one of them. I am happy to give you some answers. Not all of them, mind you. It took a mountain of paperwork to even give me permission to talk to you and the others like this," she indicated her white clothing.

Jak cocked her head at the woman. What on earth was 'paperwork'?

"I'm sorry, I'm rambling," the woman went on. "You want to know about Illadar."

"Yes," said Jak, leaning forward a bit. "What can you tell me?"

"All I can say is that it's bigger than anything you have yet to imagine. You will fully understand when it comes time to create it, which is very soon."

"Why can't you tell me now?"

"Because either you wouldn't believe me, or you would feel so overwhelmed that you might chicken out."

"Chicken?" Jak was having trouble understanding this strange woman. Had this really been the one to lead Seph and the others? She wasn't at all like Jak would have expected.

"Sorry, I mean lose confidence, decide not to go through with it. That sort of thing."

"Very well, so you can't tell me everything." Jak wasn't surprised. "But what about Cain?"

The woman's face fell. "He is still a great threat. And he travels to your location even as we speak. He will be there in a matter of days."

Jak nodded, surprising herself by how calm she felt. She had expected as much. "How do I stop him?"

"You find the third Pillar of Eternity of course," she said, with an air of her cheerfulness returning.

"But you said I only have a few days. Both Pillars took me much longer to find."

"The third one is not like the others."

"What do you mean?" Jak leaned forward. If only the woman would just get to the point and tell her where it is. "Are you saying it's close? In the valley maybe?"

"In a manner of speaking. There are three types of magic accessible to most of us. Do you know what they are?"

Jak thought it through. "There are a lot more than three brands."

"I'm talking more globally than brands. Think of the two Pillars, what do they do?"

"One controls time, and the other lets me travel instantly from one location to another."

"Time and space. These are two of the fundamental laws governing the universe. They are states of being, and the Pillars give us a glimpse into those higher dimensions. Yet they are still so hard for most to understand that your ancestors created the Pillars to sort of represent those powers, to make them easier to harness. Eventually others will come to understand them, and embody them, much like you embody the power of branding. But there is a third dimension, a third magic, that is a little easier for most to comprehend."

"Branding," Jak said, a measure of comprehension dawning.

The woman nodded. "In a manner of speaking, yes. Yet the powers of this dimension can manifest themselves in many ways."

"Are you talking about the Fae?"

A smile crept onto the woman's lips. "You're catching on. And what do the Fae magics and branding have in common?"

That wasn't too difficult for Jak to answer. She'd discussed the universal similarities of brands at the college. "All the brands affect the physical world. Or our own physical bodies. I guess the same is true of the Fae, now that I think about it."

"And there you have your answer."

The white corridor pulsed with light, and the blonde woman took a step backward as if preparing to leave. "Wait!" Jak cried. "You can't go. That wasn't an answer. What about Cain? How is any of this supposed to help me?"

White light enveloped the girl, and her hair began to fan out like there was a wind blowing it, though Jak could feel nothing. "You still have a long road ahead. And that is all I can tell you for now. Any more could have catastrophic consequences for everyone on Earth. Remember this, Jak. You are stronger than you think. You will need that strength in the coming days."

Then she vanished and the white light faded all around Jak. She was back in the valley, the sun high in the sky and beating down on her, Yewin, and Rael the troll. The link was still established. That well of truth was still there, almost taunting her with the overwhelming amount of knowledge it contained.

What had the woman meant when she said she had her answer? All she had said was that the brands and Fae had magic that affected the physical world.

She thought through what the woman had said about Pillars of Eternity. According to her they represented three dimensions. One affecting time, another affecting space, and the third...

In a rush of comprehension Jak made the connection. She broke contact with Yewin and the troll, willing the link to cease. The rush of energy and truth cut off, but she was left with one clear thought.

The third Pillar of Eternity wasn't a single Relic like the others. It was everything. It was all of the brands and Fae magics combined. It was all those magics that affected the physical world. And as an Oren, her abilities to possess multiple brands, as well as link with the Fae and partake of their abilities, she was the closest thing the world had to being the embodiment of these physical magics.

She was the third Pillar of Eternity.

A wave of dizziness took her, whether from the sudden realization or from the loss of her link with Rael and Yewin. She took a step backward and Yewin reached forward to steady her.

“What is it?” he said. “Did you learn something?”

Jak met his eyes. Thoughts were reeling inside her head, new possibilities she hadn’t paused to consider before. Marek had been right. Now was the time to act and create Illadar using the Pillars of Eternity. All three of them. “We need to gather everyone together,” she said. “Cain is coming. We can’t be here when he arrives.”



They spent the next few days preparing everything they had to

leave. To her surprise, Li, Bretton, and Mosaial did not object when she told them that they needed to pack up all their food, all their sheep and possessions, and get it ready to move.

“We were expecting things to change once you arrived,” Li told her. “The woman in white informed us of this.”

Of course the woman in white had told them that. Jak wished the woman would have told her as much. But that wasn’t her primary concern.

A day later, the rest of the Sky Fae appeared, receiving a warm welcome from Jak and the members of her group. Every Fae seemed thrilled to learn of a new species. The Sky Fae were instrumental in helping to speed up their preparations. Their mobility allowed them to move food and livestock quickly and efficiently.

Unfortunately, getting everything ready still took time. The blonde woman had told Jak that they only had a matter of days until Cain arrived. But she didn’t know if that meant one day or ten. Regardless, it took three days before most of the humans and Fae of the group were ready to leave. There was just one last problem.

“Where exactly are we going?” Skellig said to Jak at a final council meeting near the lake. She hadn’t been happy when Jak told her that they had to be prepared to leave when they had only just arrived. The others of the council all stood in a circle, with Seph and Marek on either side of Jak, and representatives of each type of Fae present as well, including Vander who had taken over the role of leader for his people now that Karlona had died. They all looked to her now for an explanation.

“I’m not entirely certain,” said Jak. “But I think the time has come to find, or maybe build, Illadar.”

Both Marek and Seph turned to look at her in surprise. She hadn’t told them what she’d learned yet.

“What do you mean, you’re not entirely certain?” said Girwirt the gnome. As per usual, his arms were folded in an expression of

incredulity.

“Meaning I know we can create Illadar, but I don’t necessarily know how. But I know I will when the time comes.” It was a vague answer, but all she was willing to share at the moment. She didn’t want to even try explaining the woman in white to anyone who hadn’t already met the strange woman.

“I knew it,” said Marek, a grin spreading across his face. “I knew you had it in you, Jak. You always were one to find a solution. Just like that time when you left me to find your dad.” He winked at her.

She scowled back at him, but only for his last comment. In truth, she almost blushed at his compliment. It was genuinely good to have him back again.

“So how do we get to this Illadar?” said Skellig, bringing the conversation back again. “There’s only one way out of this valley.”

Jak wasn’t sure of that. Now that she held the second Pillar of Eternity, the power of space, their options were greatly expanded.

“I have learned something about the Pillars of Eternity,” she said in answer. “Our way out lies in their power, and in ours.”

“Oo, this sounds exciting,” said Amelia from the column of water that held her aloft beside the lake.

Jak smiled. “Fae abilities, and the brands worn by humans, are all part of a single force. They all affect the physical world around us, or in us. I believe that all of us, collectively, represent the third Pillar of Eternity.”

She let that sink in for a moment. Surprisingly, the others did not react like she expected. Most just looked at her like they expected her to continue. Only a few eyes widened or eyebrows raised in comprehension. Gabriel was stroking his beard and nodding, as if it was all beginning to make sense for him. Skellig looked like she was restraining herself from asking Jak to get on with it.

“Anyway,” she continued. “These two Pillars—” she raised the white and black shafts, “—they represent higher magics of time and space, dimensions at the edges of what we’re currently capable of understanding. I believe that together, they, and we, can create Illadar and take everyone there.”

“You believe Illadar is a place, then?” said Vander, speaking for the first time as a member of the council. “A physical location for us to live without human oppression?”

Something about his tone struck Jak, but she answered anyway. “I no longer believe it is a state of mind or a time of peace, but a place. And a much greater place than we all realize.” She repeated the words of the strange woman in white, though she still did not have a clear picture of what Illadar might look like. Perhaps they would be able to raise a continent out of the ocean, or go to the moon. Perhaps even

create a new moon. She wasn't sure if that was possible, but then again, she did not know what they were collectively capable of.

"We'll need everyone ready to go," she said. "And I'd like all of the Fae to participate in the link." She spared a glance for Perchel. "Including the Sky Fae. I assume you have a form of linking?"

Perchel nodded. "It's not much, but yes. It sometimes helps our young learn to navigate the skies when we're first teaching them to fly. I didn't know that other Fae had a similar link." He glanced around at the others, most of whom were nodding in confirmation.

Jak turned next to Rael, the leader of the trolls. "None of this will work unless the trolls are all willing to help. We will need a massive amount of energy."

Everyone covered their ears as the troll opened his enormous mouth and bellowed, "HEEEEEELP."

Jak smiled at everyone's reaction. Well, that settled that. The trolls were with her.

"Can I count on the rest of you to be there?" she said, meeting the other representatives' eyes.

"We've never linked with a human before," said Vander. "But we will be there."

Noralim of the dwarves spoke next. "We will help as well."

All eyes turned to Girwirt who stood beside Noralim. The gnome bristled. "What? Yeah we'll help. Provided you don't turn us all into corpses, or fry us with the energy of them trolls." He glanced sidelong at Rael. "I can't trust something so big."

"The Bright Elves are, of course, on your side," said Yewin.

"As are the Water Fae," said Amelia.

"That's everyone then," said Skellig. "When do we start?"

"As soon as all the Fae can be gathered." Jak took a deep breath. She wasn't sure if she was looking forward to the link or not. She'd never linked with so many, and with all of the available species of Fae at once. Add the power of the two Pillars, and her own gift as an Oren, and she might become more than a person. She might become a goddess. What would she do with all that power. Could she even remain herself?

It took a little over an hour before all of the Fae had gathered together. The Bright and Shadow Elves stood at the forefront, facing Jak. The trolls stood at the back, and the Water Fae created a giant wave to hold them all aloft, close enough to interact with the rest of the Fae. The Sky Fae fluttered above, creating shadows that danced around the field. The dwarves and gnomes stood to the sides and behind Jak. They were ready.

Jak surveyed them all. Including the Sky Fae, there were no more than four hundred or so. Many had died in previous battles against

humans or demons. These were literally all that remained of the Fae. Hopefully, in Illadar, they would have a chance to grow and flourish. They could start families, and settle down for once. Perhaps other humans would turn into Fae and join them. From the seven thousand soldiers that already lived in this valley, she wouldn't be surprised if some of them changed eventually.

"Are you nervous?" It was Marek who spoke. He stood next to her, watching as the Fae gathered closer.

"Who wouldn't be?" she replied.

"They believe in you, Jak. We all do. And we will stand by you."

She swallowed, grateful for Marek's encouraging words, but keeping her eyes fixed on the Fae.

They all looked to her, their leader. They expected something of her. A speech maybe. She took a deep breath and raised the two Pillars of Eternity high above her head. "I have found two Pillars of Eternity. With them I plan to create Illadar, that place of peace you have been waiting for, prophesied of in the Book of Illadar, that same book that speaks of each of you."

She swallowed, and tried to judge their reaction. Most continued to look at her. To look to her. Others among the humans had also moved in closer, eager to hear her words.

"Cain is on his way. He will not let anyone live if he arrives. I could hold him off temporarily but eventually he would defeat even me. I am not strong enough to stop him alone."

"So we're just going to run away, then?" said a voice in the crowd. Jak spied one of the Shadow Fae who had spoken. A woman named...Viona, that was it.

"Not run. Build. We can't fight back until we have a solid footing, no longer on the run."

Several heads nodded at that, so she continued. "I'm sure you all know why you're here. We're going to link. All of us. Because we are the third Pillar of Eternity, the last piece of the puzzle to wield the power of creation itself. Can I count on you?"

Heads nodded, and Jak sought out the faces of her friends among the Fae. They were all there, nodding and encouraging her with their eyes. All except her mother. She would never see those eyes again.

Now was the time to make her mother's sacrifice worth it. Now was the time to use the Pillars of Eternity for good, to save everyone.

"Let us begin," she said, determination settling around her mind.

The Fae members of the council stepped forward first. She still held the Pillars of Eternity in each hand, so instead they placed their hands on her arms, shoulders, and back. Though Girwirt and Noralim each grabbed a leg, seeing as they couldn't reach much higher. Even Amelia was able to maneuver a tendril of water close enough so she

could touch Jak's arm. Her friend smiled at her, a note of encouragement in her gaze.

The rest of the Fae crowded around them, each one reaching one arm to touch one or another of their companions. Soon, they were all connected by a chain of arms and hands, each one touching someone, all leading to the center of their circle. To Jak. Seph and Marek stood to one side, watching in silence.

Jak steeled herself, allowing all emotion to drain away from her. This was it. She opened her mouth. "Do it now."

She tapped the two Pillars of Eternity on the ground to activate their magic. At the same instant, the link from hundreds of Fae rushed into her.

**I**t was power, knowledge, and intuition like she'd never felt before.

Awareness of light, darkness, sky, earth, water, fire, and more flooded her brain. Surely her physical body could not contain this. No human being could fathom so much at once. Was she even part of her physical body anymore, or was she somewhere else? It seemed she was out among the stars, looking down at their little, tiny, insignificant planet from afar.

Yet some part of her remained. She was Jak, of Riverbrook. Her father was Rael. Her mother was Karlona. They were both gone, and yet they weren't at the same time. They lived on. Their bodies were part of the Earth, their memories a part of her, their souls...were somewhere else.

The powers of time and space were present as well. In some way, time no longer seemed to matter. Her body was still fixed in its present location, but there was so much more to learn out there, out among the stars.

The woman in white had been right. The possibilities were so much larger than she had ever hoped to fathom before. Illadar was no valley. It was no state of mind. It wasn't even on their planet. No matter what they did on Earth, they would always be hunted. That much was clear. At this beginning stage of their development they had to find somewhere else to flourish, to allow the people of Earth time to advance, where one day they would be allowed to reintegrate again. But that was a long way off. In the meantime, they would need a haven. They would need Illadar.

Jak temporarily brought her attention back to the present moment. She had to make sure all the Fae remained safe during the link. Massive wells of power flowed into her from the trolls. She directed just enough of that power, a drop in the ocean of energy, to the Fae around her. That would keep them from becoming drained of life while she did what else needed to be done.

Illadar would take time to create. But she had time, embodied in one of the Pillars of Eternity. She had all the time in the universe. And

with the powers of space, she could manipulate events far beyond her reach. But to do that, she would need knowledge.

Let there be light.

Knowledge brought on from her link with the Bright Elves illuminated the path ahead. She turned her attention to the sun. There was matter there, deep within, and plenty for their purposes. She called on the powers of space, guided by her link with the gnomes and dwarves, shepards of fire and earth.

With it, she removed a portion of the sun, a large portion, nearly comparable in size to their own planet, but just a dot in comparison to the sun itself. The bead of white hot matter began to cool as it was drawn away from the burning surface of the sun. Yet it was still hot. Hotter than any living thing could withstand.

Jak guided it further and further away from the sun, only vaguely aware of how enormous her task was. No mortal being could do what she now did, guiding a world of matter away from a burning sun. And yet she did it. Size no longer mattered. Distance no longer mattered. Time no longer mattered.

She let the world-sized hunk of matter cool. With time warping around her, it became hard to tell if her work lasted only minutes, or millenia. In one sense, the world did not form until she commanded it to do so. In another sense, it had already happened billions of years earlier. She held the power of time and space in her hands. Petty details like the time it took to create a world hardly mattered. To her, it took both minutes *and* millenia all at once.

She guided the giant world-shaped rock even further away from the sun. She couldn't bring it close to their own earth. Doing so would cause catastrophic damage to both worlds. They had to be kept apart.

Even more knowledge filled her, informing her of the best location for this new world. For those of Earth would eventually become more sophisticated. They would find their world, and study it. They would learn of life existing there, and would send weapons to target the Fae even from across the stars. They had to be distant, but close. Nearby, but hidden.

Jak guided the planet away from their earth, until it stood on the opposite side of the sun, in approximately the same orbit. No one would see it there. The humans of earth would never detect it. Not at least until they were ready for a reunification of their worlds. Perhaps then, they would be able to find Illadar. But until then, there was no better place.

As she worked, some of the landmass broke off to become moons, the power of the Pillars of Eternity and the Fae working almost with a will of its own to shape the world and its satellites.

Other Fae abilities came to her aid as she worked her magic. Using

the power of the Sky Fae, she brought atmosphere to the burning rock. As the planet cooled, she used the power of the Water Fae to combine oxygen and hydrogen to form water. What wonders she possessed with all this energy and Fae power rushing through her. It would take years before anyone possessed the knowledge of how to create water, or what it was made of. Would she even remember once the link was broken? Could her brain even possess so much knowledge?

There was more to do before Illadar was finished. The weather patterns were off, and it needed life, harvesting, and love. Yet she could not provide all of that yet. A part was missing. Several parts, in fact. Yet even as she realized the problem, she also happened upon the answer. There were still more Fae yet to appear, and they would become the missing link, the final touch to make Illadar complete. Yet it existed. They could go there, even live there for a time without worry of being attacked by demons or worse.

Her thoughts turned suddenly back on her own earth, focusing inward, seeking a single individual among a sea of millions of living beings. The one that did not fit.

Cain. There he was, flying through the air at a breathtaking speed. Even now, he was speeding over the western sea, nearly at their doorstep. He would arrive at their little valley within a day at most.

She had the power to snuff him out of existence. Surely with the power to create worlds, she could eliminate one relatively tiny threat. She turned her power on the man, willing it to strike, to rip every atom of Cain's body apart, and scatter each one across the stars.

But she could not do it. The Pillars of Eternity resisted. They almost whispered their protest to her. These were Relics of creation. They could not be used for destruction. Their purpose was fulfilled in the formation of Illadar.

Jak felt her body sigh, knowing that there would be no point in trying to persuade the Relics otherwise, just as she couldn't convince a bird to be a fish. Their primary job was finished, it was time to let them rest.

She let the magic of the Pillars ease, and with that magic went her ability to change the world of Illadar. It stood, nearly two-hundred million miles away, waiting for them.

She broke the link with the rest of the Fae.

Instantly she staggered, feeling the knowledge and power of their link escape her. If she had not been held on all sides by members of the Fae, she would have fallen. Instead, she leaned against them, and against the Pillars of Eternity for support.

She wasn't the only one struggling. Others around her collapsed on the ground, exhausted but still alive. They were all still alive. But even the trolls sat on the earth as if tired. The exertion of creating an entire



world had taken a lot out of them. Understandable.

“What happened?” It was Marek. He looked from Jak to the others. “Did you do it?”

“We did it,” Jak said through intense breathing. “We created Illadar. We were thinking too small. Illadar isn’t a valley, or even a country. It’s an entire planet. And it’s out there,” she pointed above. “On the other side of the sun. Waiting for us.”

A smile split Marek’s face, but laughter erupted from Seph. Joyous laughter. He threw himself at Jak and wrapped his arms tightly around her. Whispering in her ear, he said. “I knew you had it in you, Jak. I never doubted.”

“I love you,” she said in response, then caught herself. Where had that come from? She almost panicked as she saw the startled look in Seph’s eyes. But then he smiled, and all anxiety escaped her.

“I love you too, Jak.”

Then he kissed her. In front of everyone, their lips met and Jak felt herself melting into Seph’s strong embrace. She’d never felt so accomplished, so proud of what she had done, and so glad to be held by someone she loved. She meant her words too. She loved this man.

Seph broke the embrace but continued holding her arm to keep her steady. She used the Pillars of Eternity to further keep herself from falling to her knees.

Marek leaned in eagerly to help steady her, joining Seph in doing so. “What do we do now? How do we get there?”

“I think we’d all be interested in knowing that?” said Yewin. His breathing was coming fast, but he looked to her with excitement shining through his eyes. They were all looking at her like that.

“I can take us there,” said Jak. “I think. Give me a second.”

She brought the Pillars of Eternity to bear again. They should be all she needed for what came next.

A small circle formed ahead of them, next to the entrance to the valley. It was alive with purple energy, similar to that seen in the troll’s eyes, surrounding the circle. It grew, expanding like ripples in a pond, a brightly lit circle of living energy. As it grew, cold air blew over each of them, coming from the direction of the circle. Everyone stood transfixed as they watched.

Jak grit her teeth. Somehow, the effort of creating the circle took more strength than she anticipated. Perhaps all of her strength had left her after creating Illadar. But she still had enough for this. She had to.

“It’s a portal!” she yelled so everyone could hear. “We need everyone to go through.”

No one stepped forward. Most were looking at her like she had gone mad. She had to convince them.

“It leads to Illadar. We’ll be safe there. We have to move quickly otherwise Cain will get here before we’re through.”

Oddly, it was Gabriel who stepped forward first. Everyone watched as he walked forward to the base of the circular, shimmering portal. Reaching one arm forward, he thrust it into the portal.

Jak could feel the collective gasp behind her as everyone watched. But Gabriel gave no reaction. Instead, he simply took two more steps straight into the portal, and out of sight.

No one said a word. Then Gabriel returned out of the shimmering light.

“It’s cold. There’s a lot of snow everywhere. But the air is breathable and with some help from the gnomes I think we could work with it. There are mountains in the distance where we can find shelter.”

Whereas most had been scared to venture forward before, now Fae and humans alike rushed to enter the portal. Gabriel disappeared once again on the other side, and he was followed by a mass of bodies pushing and pressing against each other, eager to finally see their new home. Illadar.

“I’m going to need your help.” Jak said to Seph and Marek. “I’ll be weak from keeping this portal going. Just hold me up if you can.”

Seph and Marek obeyed, one on each side, putting their head and shoulders under each arm to bear her aloft.

Soon enough, everyone was going through the portal. They had all been prepared to leave. They went in with their wagons, full of food and seeds for planting. Pitch-covered wagons carrying Water Fae also went through. Most of the Fae went in first, followed by thousands of the others. People from the east, the north, and the south, let by Li, Bretton, and Mosaial, went in. Even their livestock followed. Jak wasn’t sure if the livestock would survive in the cold, but at least they would provide food for the rest of them for a time.

It took hours, all while Jak held the portal in place. She had no strength of her own now, and only stood with the support of Seph and Marek. But she kept that portal alive. She would not let it fall until everyone was across.

Skellig stayed to see the last of the people go through. Soon enough, they four were the only ones left on this side.

“You coming, Jak?” Skellig called to her from her place next to the portal.

“Yes, we’re coming.” Jak said, though she would again need Seph and Marek’s help.

Skellig gave a small nod, then disappeared into the portal.

With a slight nod to Seph and Marek, they led her forward. This was it. She was finally going to rest in this world she and the Fae had

created. Even with a Sleeplessness brand, she would probably sleep for days. But at least she could sleep with the assurance that they were safely away from...

Pain exploded in her head. A headache so strong it might have been a white-hot poker stabbing through her temple. She cried out, and Seph stopped trying to push her forward.

"What's wrong?" he said, concern furrowing his brow.

Laughter rang out in Jak's mind. Cain's laughter. She was hearing him in her head again. She thought he had somehow removed that ability? She hadn't seen him in her head since before they had begun to climb Mt. Knot.

As if hearing her thoughts, Cain spoke to her mind. "Our connection as Orens cannot be broken. I only needed to hide it from you for a while. I didn't want to let you in on my little secret. Now, see through my eyes. Be my hands. Channel my power!"

She blinked through the pain. "What are you talking about?" she said aloud. "Be your hands?"

"That last part wasn't intended for you." said a voice to one side. She turned to see Marek standing there, his eyes met hers, and fear clutched at her stomach.

"Marek? You...you heard?"

The laughter boiled in her head once more. Cain was ecstatic. But as he laughed, glowing lines began appearing on Marek's body. They started with his Telekinetic brand on his left hand, but grew out from there. They covered him, every part of him. She had seen something like that before. On Cain, and on his servant, Kuldain.

Marek belonged to the enemy.

Seph began to react, but Marek quickly sent him hurling backward through the portal with a burst of telekinetic magic. "No!" Jak shouted as she watched Seph disappear.

She fell to her knees, but Marek's grip on her arm tightened and Jak felt a sharp pain as something etched its way along her arm. She recognized the sensation instantly. Marek was branding her. But how? Marek wasn't a Gifter. But perhaps he could be, with all those other brands. Could this be what Cain meant about using his power?

Too weak to pull away, she looked down to see what brand was forming on her skin. The markings were clearly visible. Three circles placed within one another.

Marek was giving her a Void brand.

"Marek, please! What are you doing?" The laughter in her head continued as she searched her childhood friend's face for answers.

"I'm sorry, Jak." Marek's face remained a hollow emptiness.

The Void brand finished forming, and immediately Jak felt all of her power vanish. Crushing fatigue forced her to the ground as her

Strength and Sleeplessness brands failed her. Those wells of power she'd come to associate with Flamedancing, Thunder, and Telekinesis were also gone. Worst of all, the magic of the Pillars of Eternity winked out.

The portal began closing in on itself.

Marek's face contained no emotion as he let go of Jak. Then in one fluid motion he reached out his hand and sent a burst of magic at her. She tumbled backward as a wave of Telekinesis sent her flying into the closing portal. The Pillars of Eternity went spinning out of her hands, falling to the ground at Marek's feet.

She found herself stranded millions of miles away on a cold, barren wasteland on the other side. The Pillars of Eternity were gone, as was her power. She had nothing left.

## Epilogue

Marek waited patiently for his master to appear. It didn't take

long before a small speck on the horizon turned into the form of a man as Cain slowly approached. He didn't particularly like Cain all that much, but he owed the man his life, as well as so much more.

So this was what it felt like to betray his best friend. Oddly, he didn't feel much at all. Perhaps it was the extensive...modifications Cain had bestowed upon him. But even with all that, he was still the same boy he once was. Well...not a boy. He wasn't that. No boy could experience what he had, or seen what he'd seen.

Yet despite the fact that Marek felt little for Jak now, there must have been something prompting him to send her through the portal instead of killing her the moment she was defenseless. He was going to have to explain himself on that count.

Cain came to rest on the ground next to him, the two of them alone in a valley that moments before had been occupied by over seven thousand people.

"You have them," Cain's eyes gleamed as he caught sight of the two Pillars of Eternity that Marek now held, recovered once Jak had entered the portal.

Marek nodded. Not a word of greeting, no praise for a job well done, just going straight for the Relics. Typical. Though he had to admit he would have done the same.

He handed the two staffs to his master without hesitation. He wasn't even sure he could have hesitated. Cain had given him a multitude of brands, and he was relatively sure some of them would ensure his obedience. But he could deal with that. For now. But the power of those Relics was tempting. If he could somehow take them for himself one day...

Cain held them both in one hand, gently stroking their polished surfaces.

"They won't do what you want them to," Marek said, watching as his hideously disfigured savior cradled the Pillars. "She told me they don't allow their user to kill."

"All in good time, son," said Cain.

"Son?" That was a new one. Perhaps Cain did show a measure of gratitude after all, at least in the way he addressed his subordinates. That was a good sign, it meant that Marek would likely rise to become Cain's most trusted confidant. And Marek would need that.

"Every Relic, just like every person, can be broken." Cain flashed a cruel smile at Marek. "All I need is time. And with the others gone, I have all the time in the world. Even if it takes centuries."

"So you intend to wait before conquering the kingdom?" Marek asked, cocking his head, curious to hear his master's answer.

"Not at all. I hardly need these to overrun a place with such puny defenses like Skyecliff. The queen already dances to my song. No, the Pillars will serve a greater purpose. Once they work for me, we can destroy the planet they created and be rid of the Fae for good."

Marek nodded. He'd managed to guide Jak and the Fae into isolating themselves, preventing them from meddling here on Earth, and making it easier to destroy them from afar. Assuming Cain could get the Pillars of Eternity working.

"What happens next, then?"

Cain grinned. "My children are already at Skyecliff, overrunning the defenses there. I managed to...convince the lovely Telma to leave the city all but defenseless. While they work, I will personally go to Tradehall and lay waste to that city."

"And what of me?" Marek asked.

Cain didn't hesitate with his answer. "Go to Skyecliff and ensure my children finish what they started. Give help as needed. Put an end to anyone who stands in your way. I will join you eventually."

Marek gave a curt nod, and activated his Telekinesis brand, getting ready to fly out of the valley and northeast towards Skyecliff.

"But Marek," said Cain in a low tone. Marek paused. His master's face was a dark mask. "Don't think that I forgot your failure to kill the girl. Fail me like that again and I will not only remove your gifts, but I will make you beg for death."

Marek made no show of emotion. "It was a momentary lapse in judgement. She'll probably die of exposure on that planet anyway. But I won't fail you again."

"See that you don't. You could be the one, Marek. The one to stand by my side for eternity."

With that, Cain continued to cradle the Pillars in his arms, like a father looking after his newborn. Marek, on the other hand, rose into the air and shot towards Skyecliff.

He had told Cain the truth. Failure to kill Jak had been a momentary lapse. He had far more important concerns now, far more important destinies to discover. Powers beyond his imagination. Cain

was his key to all of it, the one who had first introduced him to what was possible. In a way, he would always be grateful to the man for that.

Though he did hold one secret back from his master. He didn't want to rule by Cain's side for eternity. No, he didn't want to be second to anyone. For now, he would do what he was told. But he would wait, find that opportunity. It would come, he was sure of that, if he had to wait centuries. One day, he would be the one to dominate this and countless other worlds.

A smile spread on Marek's lips as he sped across mountains and plains.

## Author's Note

Please don't kill me for that cliffhanger. Don't worry, the next book is coming soon (though perhaps a few weeks delayed because I'll be on my honeymoon #sorrynotsorry)

But I hope you liked this one. I've been looking forward to writing this particular book ever since I started the series and outlined what would happen in each book. It was, by far, my favorite book to write up to this point. And I've written seven.

Jak has a bit of a long way to go after this, but there are only three more books left in the series. Hopefully it doesn't take too long for her to get her powers back, if she gets them back at all (can't spoil it).

As I mentioned before, I am getting married very soon, as of this writing. She is the love of my life, and I simply can't wait for the wedding! But for those interested in the resolution to this series, let me add that I fully intend to have at least a first draft of the remaining books done before the wedding. So while the release might get delayed, the books will still come fast after I get back.

And that's it for book 5! I can't wait to see you again soon for book 6: As Winter Spawns. Let's just say, it's a bit of a dark time.



## About the Author

Jason Hamilton is an unapologetic nerd of all things science fiction and fantasy. He is the author of the *Roots of Creation* and *Alice: The Last Founder* series, and many other forthcoming novels.

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